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Split

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VOL.3



Yaoi  *Novel*

VISIT...

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“Shiiba, don’t forget,” Munechika said earnestly.

“Munechika?”

“You vowed never to betray me. I made you the same vow. You can ask for my help anytime. You’re never alone.”

Munechika seemed to sense that more danger lay ahead for both of them.

“Don’t leave me—whatever happens,” Munechika whispered.

Shiiba was lost in a dream and could only nod his head.

Written By

Saki Aida

January 3rd

Blood Type: AB

I thought somehow, I'd finally exercise this year...but I've ended up doing nothing more than walk my dog.

Illustrated By

Chiharu Nara

Born: June

Blood Type: O

I'm currently wrapped up in a certain racing game. I'm terribly disappointed it doesn't have a soundtrack.



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Illustrations by
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English translation by
Translation By Design



S Vol.3

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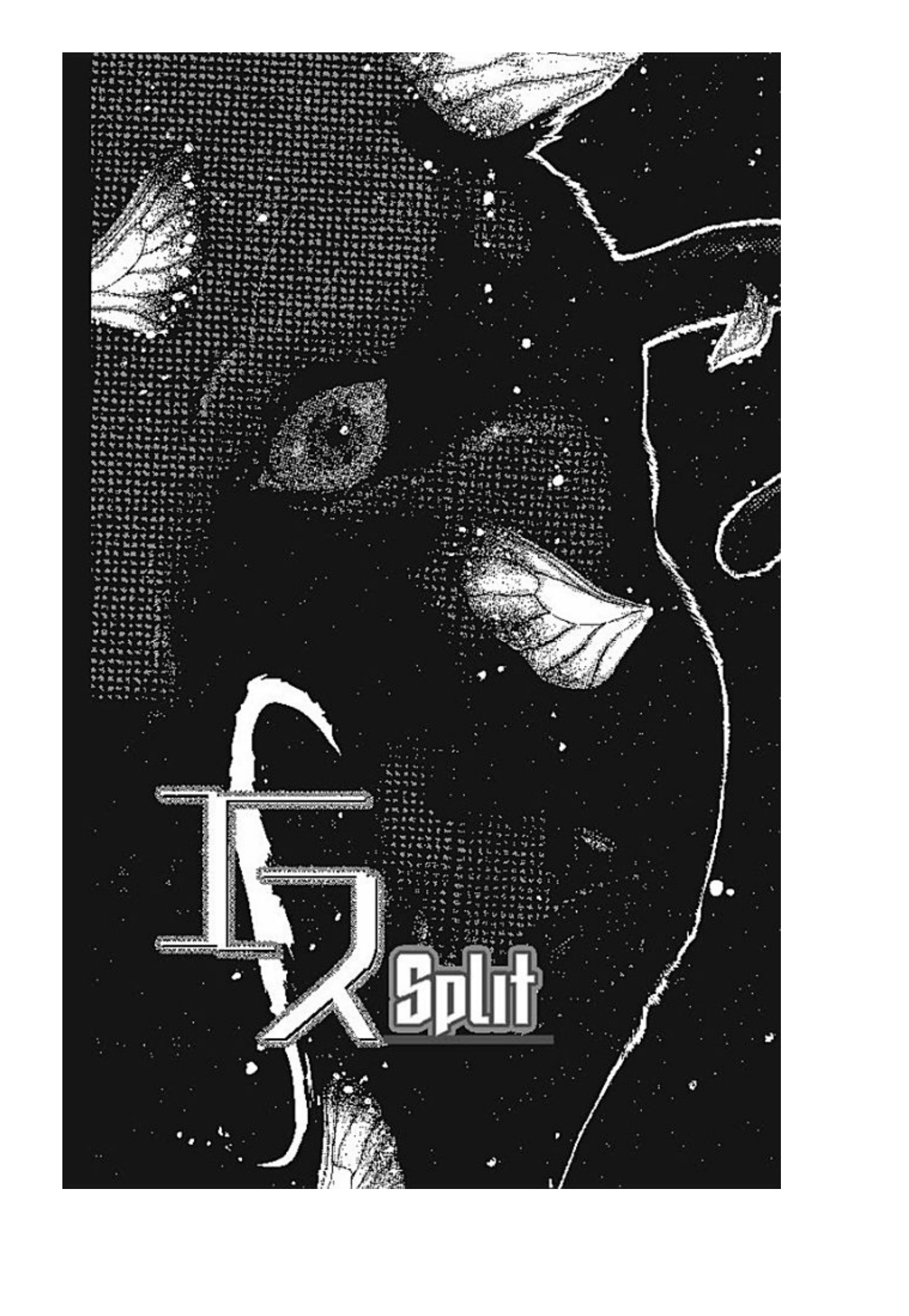
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Chapter 1

"**W**hy, if it isn't Akira. Long time no see."

The voice called out to him as he exited Golden Street's gate, just a little way beyond Shinjuku Kabukicho. Masaki Shiiba stopped in his tracks as he acknowledged the alias name. His gaze fell on a slightly rotund middle-aged woman, who stood there calling his name.

"Mama? What are you doing in a place like this?" he asked.

The familiar merchant, whom everyone called "Mama," was standing alone outside her store. It was nine o'clock in the evening, still early for this part of town, so there weren't many drinkers ambling home yet.

"Exactly as you see—" Mama answered, "I'm touting my goods. But this place is totally deserted. Come on in, Akira. You'll come inside for a drink, right? There're free snacks!"

"Sorry. I have something I've got to do."

"You mean you're going for a drink at Nabe's place again? Surely you don't have fun in that stuffy old place? Come on inside."

"I'll come again another day," Shiiba promised.

"You always say that, but you never do." She tugged on his sleeve.

Shiiba pulled himself free and began walking away.

The narrow alley he came to was lined with old houses built with terraces. Every square inch of space was covered in boards and posters that advertised

the various shops. The tiny snack bars had adjoining eaves that were interlinked in a curious fashion. Everything was in poor shape—relics reminiscent of older days.

Shiiba stopped in front of one of the bars. When he opened the door and stepped inside, Watanabe, the owner, shouted a greeting from his place behind the counter. There wasn't a single customer in the small, cramped establishment.

"It's been a while. I thought you might have moved or changed jobs," Watanabe said.

"As if I could, with the economy as it is," Shiiba replied.

"Tell me about it." Watanabe frowned and offered Shiiba a towel. "Civil service work is the best. I really regret quitting the detective agency."

Shiiba smiled wryly. "I know you don't mean that."

He took out a packet of cigarettes from his top pocket. He knew that when Watanabe had quit the police force ten years ago, the man had left that hard, dirty life behind. Shiiba knew more than anyone that Watanabe had no lingering affection for his time on the force.

"You're going to have at least one drink, right?" Watanabe urged.

Before Shiiba had a chance to reply, Watanabe had placed a glass of whiskey on the table. Shiiba lifted the glass up and examined its amber liquid. Thoughts slowly formed in the recesses of his mind.

Did this count as work? Or was it leisure? Every day, he donned the mask of Akira Shibano; every day, he lived Akira Shibano's life. He wasn't sure if he ever spent time as Masaki Shiiba anymore.

He had been in this area for about a month, investigating a certain case. Finally, he'd collected enough information and passed it on to the team inquiring into the recent incidents. Tonight would be the last night he would spend here.

His job was over, so Shiiba guessed right now must be his own private time.

Telling himself that, he knocked back the whiskey. He was so tired—trying to work out what he was and who he was, at that very moment, was exhausting.

“Hey ‘Nabe, got any gossip for me?” he asked.

Even though his business here was over, Shiiba couldn’t help himself—his detective instinct was always on high alert.

Watanabe was one of his informants. Two years ago, Shiiba had helped clear Watanabe’s wife of drug charges. Since then, Watanabe had felt indebted to Shiiba. People with gang connections often came to his snack shop for a drink. Whenever Watanabe heard rumors of gun smuggling, he would pass the information on to Shiiba.

Watanabe had quit the force because he’d hated it, yet now, he passed on information to a young detective. Shiiba sympathized with Watanabe’s difficult position, and he didn’t want to probe the man unnecessarily. But he couldn’t ignore the valuable opportunity presented by using such a man.

Shiiba was employed by the Metropolitan Police’s Counter-Organized Crime Department, Unit Five (COC5), which investigated matters related to narcotics and guns. Shiiba had always been in COC5’s counter-arms division because he specialized in gun-related crimes. But for all of his hard work, he never saw the limelight. He never actually took part in apprehending criminals or seizing guns. Shiiba was a guns-specialist intelligence agent and, therefore, gathering information was the extent of his job.

The Counter-Arms Division was separated into teams: Incidents and Intelligence. The arrest and prosecution of criminal suspects fell under the domain of the Incidents Team. Shiiba and the other Intelligence detectives worked in the background. Their identities hidden, they infiltrated the various criminal underworlds, gathering information on who was holding guns and what the selling routes were.

There were times when they would become involved with the gangs, or uncover evidence by befriending hardened criminals. For that reason, they couldn’t tell anyone that they were detectives, they couldn’t carry police ID, and they always worked alone.

Watanabe shrugged. “Nothing. All my regulars have been going next door.”

“Oh, they have that big sign. It looks like a young person’s bar.” Shiiba picked the evening paper off the counter and browsed the front page. “All the kids must hang out there. It has that fresh, hip feeling. This area has really changed recently.”

During the height of the bubble economy, many shops went out of business as land prices soared. This area had turned into a ghost town for a while. In 1999, thanks to the passing of new renting laws, bars had begun to spring up again. However, even though several new shops opened up, many remained closed.

“That looks like bad news for you,” Watanabe said, indicating the newspaper.

“Yes. Up to three guns now. The bosses are really on edge.”

They were talking about a gun-related crime that had occurred last month. A young man, covered in blood, had been found collapsed under the Sofu-line bridge. He had been discovered by a white-collar worker from Edokawa, who was taking his dog for a walk that night. The man had dialed emergency services, and the injured victim had been taken to the closest E.R.

There had been bullet wounds in the man’s legs. The doctors immediately realized that his injuries had been caused by a gun, and they reported it to the police straightaway.

The young man was twenty-five. He had no permanent work, but he lived close by. When the police asked him what had happened, he said that he’d merely been testing out a gun when he injured himself. It had happened during rush hour, so the sound of the gunshots had been drowned out by the passing trains. That was why he had gone there for target practice in the first place. But when he had taken the gun out of his pocket, he’d accidentally pulled the trigger.

Just as he’d said, the police recovered cartridges on the scene. They knew that the man must have gotten the gun from an illegal source, but no matter how many times they questioned him, they couldn’t get any solid leads to

follow up on—because the young man had ordered it off the Internet. One day, he'd gotten an e-mail from someone he didn't know asking if he would like to buy a gun. He'd been attracted to the idea of owning a gun. A few days after transferring money to the stranger's account, he'd been sent a real gun. The address had been from a free Internet e-mail account. When the police traced the IP address, they found out that it had been accessed from an Internet café in the city.

Four days later, the police recovered another bootlegged gun. Late at night, an officer on patrol had stopped three drunken men who were being rowdy. The officer asked them some standard questions. When he did so, one of them turned pale and ran. The officer caught him and then demanded he come to the police box. When the officer started to look through the drunken man's bag, he pulled out what looked like a gun.

It was immediately referred to COC5's Incidents Team, which interrogated the man on the spot. His story was similar to the other man's. One day, he'd suddenly received an e-mail. The two recovered guns were made with the same materials, so the officers on the case decided that the two incidents had to be related. COC5 had started a full-blown investigation.

Yesterday, they had recovered another gun, which had been obtained in a similar manner. This time, it belonged to a twenty-year-old university student. Apparently, his mother had found the gun in her son's room. She'd known that he was an enthusiast of model guns, but sensing that there was something different about this one, she'd taken it to her local police station to have it checked. There, it had been confirmed as another one of those black-market guns.

The three men didn't know each other, and they didn't frequent the same Internet sites. The only thing that connected them all was that e-mail. They had all paid 30,000 yen for their guns. The guns were far too cheap—even for illegal ones—but, surprisingly, each one was very well made. They shot with lethal force and, when tested, they met the same standards as professionally-made guns.

Discovering three illegal guns in the span of one month was big news. What

really concerned the police was that all three men had totally clean records. None of them had been involved with any of the Tokyo gangs. They were plain, ordinary citizens. The pieces just didn't add up. Whoever these guns belonged to, the owner seemed to sell to anyone who had the money.

Shiiba's bosses had ordered all the Intelligence officers to make this case their top priority.

"Really bad news, selling guns to ordinary kids," Watanabe commented. "Well, if people want something, then someone will find a way to sell it."

"Nowadays, you don't have to be Yakuza to get your hands on weapons," said Shiiba.

Since 2003, the Metropolitan Police had recovered more guns from ordinary citizens than it had from Yakuza. Things had changed. In this modern day and age, it was far too easy for gun enthusiasts to track down real guns on the Internet.

Every year, over two hundred gun-related crimes were reported. However, in the past few years, the amount of recovered firearms had decreased. Those statistics probably didn't reflect the fact that there were still countless guns hidden in Japan.

Shiiba had the feeling that the guns the police did find were only the tip of the iceberg. However, if the Metropolitan Police eased up for even one moment, the number of guns on the street would only increase.

"You want another?" Watanabe asked as he reached to take the empty glass from Shiiba's hand.

"No, I—"

Suddenly, the door swung open. A few young men burst into the snack bar.

"What?! You want to drink in this dump?" one of them complained loudly.

"Why not? This is part of the real Golden Street, right?" another asked, trying to pacify his friend.

They were about five young men in total. They shuffled behind Shiiba and sat

around the L-shaped counter. Each of them looked to be in their mid-to late-twenties. Shiiba could see from their bright red faces that they had already had too many drinks.

“Siiir. A bottle! Hennessy!” one of the men (who looked a bit like a hedgehog) rudely shouted to Watanabe. “Just leave some ice and the bottle here. We’ll do it ourselves.”

Watanabe didn’t even try to hide his distaste for these new customers. He put a bottle of whiskey and a bucket of ice in front of them. They didn’t wait for glasses, simply pouring the contents of the bottle into the ice bucket.

“Sasaki, driiiiink!” they chanted, goading a large man.

Frowning, the large man said, “I don’t want to. I want to go next door.”

“Drink this. Then, we’ll invite you to Falsare’s VIP room,” another of the young men said persuasively.

That seemed to change the large man’s mind. “Really? Kuro, will you really get me in?” He visibly perked up, lifting the ice bucket.

Watanabe watched, thoroughly disgusted, as the large man started to down the contents of the bucket. When the young man had, quite impressively, managed to slug back the entire thing, his companions clapped and whistled in admiration.

“Well, ‘Nabe, I’m going home,” Shiiba said.

Nabe mouthed the word, “Sorry.”

When Shiiba glanced back at the noisy group of men, he caught the gaze of the large man who had just finished the whiskey.

As Shiiba was about to walk through the door, the large man shouted, “Hey, you! Wait! What are you doing? Running away?!” The man attempted to stand, but, due to all that alcohol, he was unsteady on his feet.

“I didn’t mean any disrespect,” Shiiba apologized. He didn’t want to get caught up in any trouble.

Unfortunately, the man was too drunk to care. He grabbed Shiiba's shirt and pulled the young detective back. Shiiba could smell the stench of alcohol on the man's breath.

"You've been looking miserable since we came in here," the man growled. "I don't like you."

Shiiba wasn't stupid enough to start fights with drunks, but he wasn't going to let himself get beaten up, either.

"You're imagining things. I apologized, didn't I? Let me go," Shiiba calmly ordered, pushing the man's arm away.

The man's face twisted up, and he clutched Shiiba's shirt in a tighter grip. "You bastard."

The young man named Kuro tried to smooth things over. "Sasaki, leave it."

He had been the one who had persuaded Sasaki to drink all that alcohol in the first place. He stood up and approached them, but Sasaki didn't seem to notice. The large man pushed Shiiba back until he was draped across the counter.

"Sasaki, come on now..." Kuro said.

"Shut the hell up! I—ugh!"

Sasaki wasn't allowed to finish. Kuro had him in a headlock in an instant. A metallic sound rang out.

Shiiba saw something glint in Kuro's hand, and he knew he had to act fast. "Hey, what are you doing?!"

Kuro smiled. In his hand was a silver switchblade.

"Kuro, stop! I'm sorry. I'll behave now. Forgive me!" Sasaki begged pathetically.

"Give me a break. If you're going to pull this crap, do it somewhere else," Watanabe grumbled.

Kuro shrugged and put away the knife. He whispered into the large man's

ear, “Sasaki, go home. I’m not going to let my night be ruined by a jerk like you. I don’t want to see your ugly face again. Got me?”

To Shiiba, it looked like Kuro was nibbling on Sasaki’s ear.

Sasaki nodded a little and then stumbled out of the bar.

“Sorry, barkeep. We’ll behave ourselves now. Please, let us finish our drinks here.” Kuro gave a Watanabe a huge smile.

Watanabe grimaced, but he was in no position to turn down paying customers.

Kuro faced Shiiba. “We inconvenienced you. Let us get you a drink to say we’re sorry.”

Shiiba wanted to refuse the offer, but he didn’t want to leave Watanabe alone with a bunch of drunks, so he agreed. He sat down next to Kuro, whose friends were drinking away, unperturbed. Shiiba wondered if this sort of thing was a regular occurrence for them. Kuro poured some whiskey into two glasses.

“What’s your name?” Kuro asked.

Shiiba noticed that Kuro had a few facial piercings: one on his eyebrow, one on his nose, and one on his lip. He gave the young man the false name he used while he was working undercover: “Shibano.”

Kuro raised his glass. “I’m Kuro. Shibano, it’s good to meet you. Cheers.”

Lightly chinking their glasses, Kuro gulped the whiskey as if it were water.

Shiiba sipped from his own glass while assessing Kuro from the corner of his eye. On the surface, Kuro looked like any of the other young men who frequented this area, but he carried a concealed knife, which was illegal, so there was no way he could be trusted. He was a little taller than Shiiba, maybe around five-foot, three-inches tall and about one-hundred-fifty pounds. He took care with his appearance. Shiiba noted Kuro’s waxed eyebrows. He had a thin, attractive nose. However, his lips were also thin, which made him look like he was always being sarcastic. He smiled a lot, but Shiiba got the feeling that there was something sinister behind that expression.

“Do you drink here often?” Kuro asked.

“Sometimes. You?”

“Me? I usually hang out in Shibuya. I don’t like Shinjuku, but my friend runs the bar next door. I came here for the opening night.”

One of Kuro’s friends broke into the conversation, waving the newspaper about. “Hey, look at this article. Is that the gun you saw?”

Kuro glanced at the picture and grunted. “Looks like it. But I’m talking, here. Don’t interrupt me.” He didn’t sound happy.

Shiiba put a cigarette in his mouth. He needed to calm his nerves.

Kuro offered his lighter.

Across the counter, Shiiba and Watanabe exchanged glances.

“Did you really see one of those guns?” Shiiba casually inquired.

“Huh? Yeah, I did. The person who had it told me it was real, but I wasn’t sure,” Kuro replied.

“Would you tell me more about it? I’m interested,” Shiiba gently probed, offering up his business card.

Kuro shot him a curious look. On the business card was written “Reporter—Shibano.” It listed an address and a telephone number.

“Oh, you’re a reporter?”

“Yeah. I’ve been looking into the black-market guns case.”

Now that Kuro was convinced Shiiba was a reporter, any suspicions he seemed to have instantly disappeared. Shiiba had used this trick before—with remarkable success.

“Your address is in Shinsencho. Do you live there?” Kuro asked.

“No. I share that office with a colleague.”

It wasn’t the exact truth, but it wasn’t a flat-out lie, either. The address

belonged to his friend, Inose, who had rented the place when he started working as a non-fiction writer. Of course, Shiiba had gotten permission before he'd used it as part of his cover.

“When did you see the gun?” Shiiba inquired.

“I was at a party. This guy was showing it off. He called himself Tomo. I don't know what his real name was.”

“What kind of party was it?”

“Drugs and sex, you know,” Kuro said. “It was at a house in Aoyama. I don't know whose house it was. A friend invited me.” The young man then started laughing. “When I got there, everyone was already high. But there weren't enough girls. I just sat on my own in the corner, watching. I saw this guy, he pulled out a gun and asked the girl he was with if she wanted to role-play. He had this massive grin on his face. He told the girl that it was one of the guns that had been in the news recently. Then, he ran its muzzle down her thigh. The girl started crying, but he told her there weren't any bullets in it. I kept watching because I thought they might do something interesting. Tomo told me that if I wanted one too, his friend could get me one easily.”

“Then what happened?” Shiiba prodded.

“That was it.” Kuro quirked an eyebrow. “I don't have any real interest in guns. Oh, but he did tell me that it was made in Tokyo.”

Shiiba didn't know if the gun that Kuro had seen had really been one of the black-market guns. However, the fact that it was supposedly made within the city certainly increased the likelihood of it being the real thing.

Shiiba couldn't let this go. “I suppose you don't know anything more about him?”

“Not really. He's just someone I've met in a club a few times.”

“I'd like to talk to him. Will you help me find him?”

Kuro thought for a few moments while he played with Shiiba's business card. “I don't know. What's in it for me?”

“I’ll pay you.”

“Money? I don’t need that. My father is the president of a big company. I’m bored sick with money. I want something more interesting. Will you go out with me?” Kuro peered at Shiiba from under his long eyelashes and grinned.

“Beg pardon?” Shiiba didn’t really understand.

Kuro’s friend, who had been listening during the entire exchange, said, “You’re doing it again. You’re sick in the head.”

“Shut up.” Kuro turned back to Shiiba. “Shibano, I like you. Go out with me. If you do, then I promise I’ll find Tomo for you.”

“Are you gay?” Shiiba was blunt because he wasn’t sure whether he could believe Kuro or not. The young man had to be joking.

“I’m not gay. I just don’t care. I can go out with boys and girls. You’re exactly my type.”

Shiiba could see that Kuro was sincere but still very immature. He didn’t want to date some spoiled rich kid who simply wanted to waste his time.

“Kuro, how old are you?” Shiiba asked.

“Me? I’m twenty-three. How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-nine. I don’t like dating younger people,” Shiiba said gently.

“Screw you,” Kuro muttered.

Shiiba glanced over and caught sight of Kuro’s pout. He sighed. “Ask me for something else.”

There was a glint in Kuro’s eyes. “Fine. A compromise then?”

“What is it? Tell me first.”

“If I find Tomo, you’ll let me give you a piercing.”

“I don’t understand.” Shiiba bit down on the filter of his cigarette. He knew that whatever Kuro was thinking of, it would be weird.

“You’ll get a piercing—on your nipple. It would suit you. It’ll be a really stylish present, from me to you. Doesn’t that sound good?”

Shiiba didn’t understand why a stranger getting a piercing was even remotely interesting for Kuro. To Shiiba, piercings were just another form of self-harm, self expression, or an act of rebellion against society. It was a personal choice. So, Shiiba couldn’t see how Kuro would get a kick out of him doing that.

“Fine. That’s the terms of our deal.” Shiiba figured he could cope with a piercing. He could always take it out later.

Kuro laughed. “It’s a promise, then.”

The entire bargain was ridiculous, as far as Shiiba was concerned. “When you know something, call me on my cell phone.”

Shiiba silently cursed the boy. He downed the melted ice at the bottom of the glass then stood up to go.

Chapter 2

“Phone!”

Along with the sound of the bed springs creaking, Shiiba could hear the phone ringing in the living room. Apparently, it wasn't going to stop. He sighed and tried to stand up so Munechika could answer it.

“Leave it. I'm busy,” Munechika said, stretching across the bed. He seductively ran his hands over Shiiba's body, trying to stop him from moving. His fingers worked their way up Shiiba's chest and then started gently pinching Shiiba's hard nipples.

“What are you so busy with?” Shiiba asked, grabbing Munechika's wrists. He pushed the other man back down on the bed.

“I was busy eating you. It's been two weeks since I've had such a delicious meal.” Munechika smiled. He enjoyed it when Shiiba pinned him down.

Shiiba disliked Munechika's constantly calm attitude. He climbed atop Munechika and began to move back and forth. He felt Munechika's hard member slip inside him and throb.

Munechika smiled, murmuring, “More like you're eating me.”

Shiiba stopped when he heard this. A little hesitant, his expression tightened. He drew close to Munechika. “I want you to feel what it's like sometimes.”

“I feel like I'm going to come hard.”

“I'll give you that, if you want.” Shiiba tried to sound light-hearted about it, but he really didn't feel that way. He had two weeks' worth of sexual tension

pent up inside him. He couldn't control his own body anymore.

As soon as Shiiba had opened the door, Munechika had jumped him. Shiiba had responded immediately. Their first kiss after weeks of separation had been so hard and passionate, it was more like they were biting each other. Bodies had intertwined. They had stumbled their way into the bedroom. Shiiba hadn't seen Munechika for such a long time, but, rather than dwindling, his feelings for the other man had only become more passionate.

He didn't care how they did it. All he wanted was Munechika—right now. He wanted to reach the peak of ecstasy together with this man. He couldn't confess such a thing, though. He couldn't vocalize his feelings of pure lust for Munechika.

“Mmm...ngh!”

Munechika moaned as Shiiba started to move his hips again. Munechika grabbed Shiiba's hand and brought those delicate fingers to his mouth. Shiiba tried to pull back, but Munechika held on to his wrist, running his tongue across Shiiba's palm. Then, one by one, he sucked Shiiba's fingers.

“Stop,” Shiiba said, but when he felt Munechika's hot tongue push in between his fingers, his whole body quivered. The shivers coursed over every muscle in his body, he even trembled deep inside.

His heart was so confused. He felt he might lose his composure at any moment and blurt out his true feelings for Munechika. He was trying to use the passionate sex to hide those feelings. He had to use sex as an outlet, otherwise, Shiiba felt that he would go mad.

He closed his eyes and tried to slow down his chaotic heartbeat, hoping to forget his confusion.



“What’s the matter? Bored of me already?” Munechika teased.

Shiiba still didn’t move. His chest felt tight. All the feelings he was trying to

keep locked up inside threatened to burst out.

Suddenly, Munechika pulled Shiiba close to him, until he was bent over. Munechika lifted himself up and started nibbling on Shiiba's earlobe. His voice was almost a whisper as he said, "I'm not satisfied yet. The more I'm with you, the more I want you. I don't think I want to stop this. Not ever..."

Shiiba couldn't take it anymore. He had to turn away. He knew that Munechika didn't really mean it, but hearing those words still hurt. Shiiba wanted to say the same things back to him. He wanted to scream. He wanted these needy feelings to go away. He wanted Munechika to release him from the burning passion he'd ignited inside Shiiba.

Munechika slowly started to push into Shiiba, each thrust becoming slightly more aggressive, and Shiiba was penetrated deeper and deeper. He threw his head back in ecstasy. They kissed passionately. It was as if having their bodies connected in only one place wasn't enough. Shiiba was consumed by the desire to have Munechika inside every single part of him.

He couldn't shake off the intense feelings. They'd taken over his body. He couldn't even breathe. It was as if his heart was welling up, blocking his windpipe.

"Munechika..."

Shiiba tried to move his head to get some air, but Munechika didn't let him go. The man's kisses moved across his cheek and down his throat.

"Ah."

He gulped when Munechika planted kisses on his Adam's apple. The caress of lips was light, teasing—but for some reason, Shiiba worried that Munechika might bite his neck for real.

Shiiba imagined himself gasping for breath, blood running down his neck, pouring from a deep gash. It started to turn him on. He didn't care if Munechika killed him. He didn't care if Munechika took his body.

Once again, Shiiba realized the dangerous position his emotions had placed

him in.

“You don’t like it?” Munechika asked. “If it hurts, I’ll stop.” He sounded so gentle and concerned.

Shiiba was now overcome with alarm. “Don’t stop,” he urged, desperate for Munechika to keep going.

It was just sex. It was how Shiiba paid for the information that Munechika gave him. They joined physically; they protected each other. Shiiba stabilized his emotions by having sex. “Take me. I want you to have your fill,” he whispered.

Shiiba’s movements became more frantic. Munechika smiled wickedly, as if he were a partner in a crime. It was as if he knew exactly the feelings Shiiba kept locked inside.

“You’re already there...”

Munechika thrust inside Shiiba brutally.

Shiiba reached down and took himself in hand, stroking his cock in time with Munechika’s thrusts. He was so close to climaxing. He was almost at the pinnacle of pleasure. But for some reason, the complicated feelings inside him weren’t subsiding.

Whatever he got, it wasn’t enough. However much Munechika took, it wasn’t enough.

Shiiba didn’t wonder at the origin of these feelings. He knew the reason for them. Deep down, he knew that this wasn’t just sex to him. The comfort that only comes with being in a relationship had swallowed him whole.

They weren’t in love, so this wouldn’t end in betrayal. That was just how it was.

That was why he had no regrets.

So, the more attached he got, the angrier with himself he became. Sometimes, Shiiba felt like Munechika had plunged a knife into his chest and pulled out his still-beating heart. He felt that Munechika had touched his soul. He felt that they were inexplicably linked, now.

But no matter what he wanted, he had vowed to not fall in love. No matter how much his heart cried, Shiiba would never let those feelings out.

“Munechika...I...ah!”

Munechika’s thrusts became even more passionate. Then it came—the moment when everything blurs and breathing isn’t possible. When all the feelings that are burning up inside find an exit.

Shiiba slumped into Munechika’s arms, feeling like his chest would burst at any moment. The protective shell he’d created around his heart was crumbling, bit by bit.

“Ngh.”

Warm, white cum erupted out of his cock, trickling down his shaking hands.

Everything stopped. He had no thoughts and no emotions for an instant. For a brief moment, Shiiba was released from his chains. But a second later, the ecstasy fell away from him.

Shiiba took a shower and dried himself off. He put on a bathrobe and padded into the living room, where he found Munechika relaxing on the sofa with a drink in hand.

Shiiba tiredly plunked himself down next to Munechika.

Munechika looked at him suspiciously.

“What?” Shiiba asked.

“Nothing,” was the only reply.

“Say what’s on your mind. Why did you look at me like that?”

“Don’t worry about it. I was just a little impressed.”

Shiiba couldn’t leave it alone, so he asked Munechika again, “What does that mean? Answer me!”

“You’re so persistent! If you want to know that badly...you’re just too sexy

when you look like that. You look so unsatisfied, like you want more.”

And Shiiba realized that Munechika was bantering with him. It always happened whenever Munechika drank. He seemed to enjoy saying exactly whatever would push Shiiba’s buttons, as if Shiiba’s frustration made the alcohol taste better.

“Are you saying what we just did wouldn’t satisfy me? Shut up. You’re just sex-crazed.” Shiiba knew that he sounded like a hothead, but he just had that kind of personality and couldn’t help himself. He glared at Munechika, who remained perfectly cool.

Shiiba took Munechika’s glass and downed the rest of the bourbon. Then, he violently slammed the glass back on the table.

Munechika grinned. “I’m not lying. Since I met you, I’ve found so many things about you to be very sexy. It used to be just in the bedroom. But now, even when I see you sitting here normally, you just ooze sex. If you wanted to, you’d make an excellent male host.”

Munechika had probably said that because he knew Shiiba had recently infiltrated a host club.

Shiiba had heard that one of the men managing a host club in Kabukicho had obtained guns from some gangsters. He’d entered the club by applying for a job advertisement. It hadn’t been for a position as a host, though. He’d applied to be a bartender. He had some experience working at a bar, thanks to a previous undercover assignment, so he knew how to make most of the major cocktails.

Shiiba’s month-long undercover operation had allowed him to confirm with several of the hosts working there that they had seen a gun in the manager’s office. So he’d made a report to his superiors. Soon enough, Incidents would probably raid the place.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Shiiba retorted. “What kind of host club would hire someone my age? As soon as you hit twenty-five in that job, you’re an old man.”

Every night, the young hosts would drink, laugh, and sleep with women. Their

hearts were empty, though. Prostituting oneself might be profitable, but the job took its psychological toll in the end.

“You look young enough. I think you could pass,” Munechika argued.

“Thank you for being so concerned about my future career prospects. I’m getting teary-eyed,” Shiiba said sarcastically. He poured some more alcohol into the empty glass, acting as if he didn’t have a care. In truth, he was just trying to distract himself.

After a heavy sex session, Shiiba really enjoyed their conversations. They didn’t talk about anything in particular, but he liked just chatting with Munechika.

Shiiba watched Munechika, who was watching TV through half-closed eyes. He’d examined Munechika’s masculine features so often that he should have been used to it, but, for some reason, he couldn’t take his eyes off the man.

Keigo Munechika was thirty-three—four years older than Shiiba. He was a competent man who had become successful early on in life, and now lived in a magnificent apartment in Roppongi Hills. Munechika had another side to him, though. He was also a young leader of the Matsukura Group, which was part of the larger Koujin Association.

It was that very position that made Munechika invaluable to Shiiba as an “S.” Once he’d discovered that Munechika was a big-shot in the gang world, Shiiba had offered up his body to get the leads he needed.

“S” was the code that the police gave to civilians who worked with them. It stood for “spy.” S informants were entirely different from a rat. They didn’t simply pass on information to the police, they were more like “cooperators,” and their names were formally registered with the Metropolitan Police as such.

Gathering intelligence from an S (or, in other words, “S-work”) was a common method nowadays. Actually, it was the main practice of the Public Security Police. It took time and patience to carry out S-work. However, to directly contact gang leaders was an extremely dangerous thing for everyone concerned. For that reason, there was a very special training that a detective

had to complete before being given S-work.

Still, S-work was not respected. Normal detectives disliked the practice, and it was generally detested by all other police force staff. A lot of the people who worked as an S would betray the organization that employed them in order to cooperate with the police, so it was imperative that the detective they worked with could ensure their safety. The degree of stress that both sides undertook when involved in this kind of work was often mentally damaging.

The danger didn't come solely from the outside, either. Detectives who took undercover work were cut off from the police force, so, in some cases, their motivation and professionalism slowly dwindled away. Frequently, these detectives, who had to fit in among the worst scum of society, would have to get their hands dirty and commit crimes, as well.

S-work had destroyed a lot of good detectives. There was nothing pretty about it. Detectives who used an S were under constant pressure from all sides.

“Munechika,” Shiiba murmured. “There are some black-market guns circulating in the city. Yesterday, they found a third one.”

Munechika looked at him. “That incident that happened last month? Are they connected?”

“Yeah. They're not made from model guns, and they're different from copies imported from abroad. They're very unique.” Shiiba continued to look at Munechika while he explained the situation. “If you hear anything at all, no matter how trivial, you have to tell me.”

Munechika poured another drink. After some thought, he said, “I have heard rumors lately of cheap but well-made black-market guns. They're not remodeled and they're not copies—totally new. But, they're at half the price of the real deals. Even kids can afford them. But I've heard that the guy who was selling them would only sell to gang members, so perhaps it's not related.”

Bootlegged guns weren't really unusual. Police recovered fewer of them nowadays, but there were still a fair number of smuggled CRS guns from the Philippines currently in circulation in Japan.

CRS guns were simply copies of real guns, but the recently recovered firearms were entirely original. Every single part of the guns had been designed meticulously. Only a person with the necessary skill and knowledge could accomplish that.

“I’m intrigued that these guns are originals. I want you to ask around,” Shiiba requested.

“I can’t,” Munechika refused flat-out.

Shiiba frowned. “Why? Is there some problem?”

“I’m not chasing urban legends. Anyway, it’s not your case. You don’t have to solve every crime in the city. Let some other detective do it this time.” Munechika sounded annoyed. He had real power in the Tokyo underworld, and he made all the necessary contacts, so it was difficult to complain about him as an S—but he was moody. Some days, the most difficult part of Shiiba’s job was keeping Munechika content.

“That’s not the point. It doesn’t matter whose case it is.” Shiiba’s frown deepened.

“Shiiba, you’re too obsessed with guns.”

“You’re into your work too. What’s your point?” Shiiba could hear himself getting irritated.

“There’s nothing wrong with working hard. But you’re too loyal to your job. You always sacrifice your own well being. You’re not working hard because you think it’s the right thing to do or because you want a promotion. You don’t have those ambitions, so why do you always have to go the extra mile? Sure, guns kill people. But how many people die from guns in Japan every year? Twenty? Thirty?”

“It’s not about the death count.” Shiiba turned his face away. He didn’t like it when other people questioned his devotion to his work.

His older sister, Yukari, had been the closest relative he’d had while growing up. When she had been killed by a gun, Shiiba began to despise those weapons.

He couldn't deny that he was driven by a personal grudge. However, he couldn't believe that everything he'd accomplished as a detective was merely a result of his personal feelings. Or perhaps he just didn't want to think that that was the case.

"I want you to ask around," Shiiba said again.

Munechika fell silent. He didn't look happy. Shiiba could always tell when Munechika was displeased because the man would clam up—a sharp contrast from his typically chatty personality and sharp wit.

Shiiba crossed his legs. An awkward silence filled the room. He reached out for the cigarettes on the table and lit up a smoke.

No matter what Shiiba felt for Munechika, he had to prioritize his investigation. Their relationship was first and foremost that of a detective and an S—neither of them could forget that.

Shiiba blew out a stream of smoke.

Finally, Munechika spoke again. "I have one condition."

"What is it?" Shiiba glanced over.

Munechika looked very serious as he pointed to his lap. "Sit here. Be a good boy."

Shiiba didn't understand. "What?"

"Come here and do what I say. Then I'll find out for you."

Shiiba wasn't paying attention so a little bit of ash dropped from his cigarette to the floor. He quickly put the cigarette into the ashtray.

"Munechika, what are you playing at? Don't give me some crap." Shiiba thought Munechika was just making fun of him again.

"You think I'm joking? Fine. I'm not doing anything." Munechika looked away.

Shiiba realized that the other man was being completely serious. He didn't understand why Munechika wanted him to sit on his lap. What would

Munechika get out of that? However, Munechika had the advantage here. Shiiba had to obey.

Internally, Shiiba cursed, but he lifted himself up and then sat down on Munechika's lap. "Here I am."

"That's not all I want."

"Oh...?" Shiiba said, eyeing Munechika. Sometimes, he really thought they were from different planets.

For a long time, nothing happened, so Shiiba said, "Hmm?"

Munechika's face was totally expressionless, which meant he was really angry.

Shiiba didn't want to lose his lead on the guns, so he started trying to placate Munechika. "Please?"

There was another long silence. Shiiba desperately tried to hold himself back from saying anything else, but he still felt humiliated.

"What's going on?" Shiiba hit Munechika on the chest with his fist. "Enough already. You're making a fool out of me." He got off Munechika's lap, disgusted with himself and the situation.

Munechika said, "I take it back. You're not sexy at all. *That's* your attempt at seduction?"

Shiiba was indignant. His anger quickly overshadowed his original intent. "Like I care what you say! Anyway, you always—" Shiiba was just about to launch into a tirade, when Munechika's phone rang.

"You'll have to start again," Munechika said before picking up the phone. "Yeah, it's me...no. Motoaki? And...? I see. There's really nothing that can be done about him. Got it. I'll see you tomorrow."

Shiiba could see that Munechika was irritated as he apologized and hung up.

Motoaki Matsukura was Munechika's half-brother. Motoaki had inherited the presidency of the Matsukura Group when their father had died. The

Matsukura Group was a powerful gang, boasting of over a thousand members, and based in Shinjuku. It was impossible for a young man in his twenties to run such a massive organization, of course, so there were a lot of internal problems.

Munechika was the son of the former president's mistress, so, in reality, he didn't really have much business with the Matsukura Group. But he made large financial donations to the organization, and, on the sidelines, he helped his younger brother out.

"What's the matter with your brother now?" Shiiba asked.

"That's got nothing to do with you," Munechika snapped back.

Munechika speaking to him like that hurt Shiiba, but he said nothing and just nodded. Munechika was right, it didn't have anything to do with him.

Shiiba got up and entered the bedroom. He picked up the clothes that had been scattered across the floor and quickly got dressed. As he covered himself up, his expression altered. He suddenly transformed into a detective.

He opened the door and returned to the living room, preparing to leave.

"You're going home?" Munechika frowned a little.

"Yeah."

From the time they had agreed to work together as detective and S, Shiiba had not spent the night at Munechika's. It might have been silly, but he liked making a clear distinction about their relationship.

As Shiiba headed toward the door, Munechika called him back. "Shiiba, wait." He didn't sound happy. Perhaps Munechika thought that he'd hurt Shiiba's feelings. Well, he had. But he was free to do so. He didn't *have* to do everything Shiiba asked of him. "I'm sorry."

It was a rare occurrence for Munechika to apologize.

Shiiba shrugged. "Don't worry about it. No one wants people probing into their personal business."

Munechika had told Shiiba before that his half-brother was someone he

simply couldn't abandon. It was a heavy burden he had to carry. Shiiba had always wondered what had happened in the past to make Munechika feel that way.

Resisting the urge to ask, Shiiba tapped Munechika on the chest. "You don't have to be suspicious all the time. That's not the kind of relationship we have, right?" Shiiba wanted to reaffirm their roles. They were detective and S. They slept together merely to build trust between them. They weren't lovers. "See you later."

When he tried to step out, though, Munechika pulled him back. Turning Shiiba round to face him, Munechika stole a quick kiss. "I'll see what I can find out. If I hear anything, I'll contact you."

"Thank you."

Disengaging himself from Munechika's embrace, Shiiba left. He got off the elevator, walked through the extravagant lobby, and headed down the stairs to the entrance.

The doorman opened the door for him, saying, "See you later, sir."

Shiiba nodded in acknowledgement and stepped outside. The cold air immediately assaulted him. As he quickly strode toward the station, for a moment, Shiiba wished that he was still in Munechika's bed. If he had stayed, he would be tucked up and warm, with Munechika beside him. He could sleep until morning. Even though Shiiba knew he was growing soft, he couldn't help himself. He couldn't help wanting that—just a little.

Shiiba smirked at how pathetic he was. He bundled up his black trench coat even tighter around his neck.

If he was so in love, then he should probably quit. Then they could be together as much as they wanted. They could have sex whenever they wanted.

A more comfortable life was enough to tempt any man. Not feeling a constant guilt hanging over his head seemed very alluring to Shiiba. They could make love as much as they wanted and say whatever they wanted to each other, and then...

And then what? Maybe their feelings wouldn't be as strong, one day. Maybe they would grow tired of each other if they could have sex as much as they wanted. Shiiba knew he probably wouldn't be able to handle it, anyway. He'd want to get back out in the field again. Perhaps he'd never be able to settle down.

Originally, Shiiba's career had been on the fast track up through the ranks of the Metropolitan Police, but he'd decided instead to get out on the streets. He'd chosen to live as an undercover police officer. Despite all the pain and trouble he knew awaited such a career choice, he'd leapt at the chance. Never once did he think he'd made a mistake. Now, he was battle-scarred. He was handling a wild S. He chased down his prey like a seasoned hunter. He never had time to look back.

There had been casualties along the way, though.

Half a year ago, one of his colleagues, Nagakura, had been shot right in front of him. Watching that revealed to Shiiba his own weak points. He had come face to face with the very weaknesses that he'd tried to ignore for so long. Finally, he understood how fragile he really was.

Afterward, he'd sobbed in Munechika's arms and made a vow: he wouldn't deny his own flaws. Instead, by accepting them, he would grow stronger. He was going to be someone who, by knowing his weaknesses, uncertainties, and angst, would never again cave under pressure.

All he could do was keep moving forward. The only choice he allowed himself was to move forward ...

He opened the door and stepped into a gun shop named Aviz. The manager of the shop was a large, but very kind man named Horibe. He was in the middle of arranging model guns in the showcase.

"Sorry, we're closed—oh, it's you, Shibano." Horibe's severe expression transformed into a smile. Perhaps it was his thick beard and massive girth, but Horibe always reminded Shiiba of a teddy bear.

"I had something I wanted to talk to you about," Shiiba said as a greeting.

“Sit down. I’ll make some coffee.” Horibe disappeared into the back of the store.

Shiiba sat down in a chair by the counter and looked around the store. It was jam-packed with replica guns. The shop was closing up, so there weren’t any customers.

Munechika owned the shop. Previously, it had been managed by Shiiba’s old S, Andou. After Andou’s death, Munechika had bought the place out of friendship.

Horibe’s knowledge of replica guns was magnificent, he was well-known in the field, and he knew a lot about what gun enthusiasts were buying these days. He wasn’t connected with the crime world, but Andou had still trusted him, so Shiiba had been honest with Horibe from the start about being a detective. The only thing he hadn’t told Horibe was his real name.

“You like your coffee black, right?” Horibe emerged from the back holding two mugs. He was a gentle man, and he had always been extraordinarily cooperative with Shiiba’s investigations. Time and again, Horibe had given good leads on newcomers to the scene and on black-market guns, so Shiiba made a point to visit him regularly.

“Actually I was planning to call you,” Horibe said.

Shiiba looked up from his mug of coffee.

Horibe was starting up his notebook PC. He clicked the mouse a few times and then signaled Shiiba to take a look. “I got an e-mail from a friend today. Look at the photos.”

It was a gun that Shiiba had never seen before. At first glance, it looked like an M29 by Smith & Wesson, but the body was too short. There were several pictures of the outside and one photo of a metal target that had been shot out, presumably to prove its power and accuracy.

“This gun...” Shiiba murmured.

“Isn’t it one of those bootlegged guns that have been in the papers lately?”

said Horibe.

“What?” Surprised, Shiiba looked at the photo again. They weren’t as clear as the ones that his superior had shown him, so he couldn’t be entirely sure. But they definitely shared the same characteristics. “How did your friend get it?”

“They’re being supplied on the Internet to gun fans. Apparently, people are getting them by replying to a spam e-mail.”

The police had suspected that there would be others carrying these illegal guns, but they hadn’t gotten any confirmation until now.

“Do the police know what linked the three guys they caught?” Horibe asked.

“Just that they were all gun fanatics who got the guns off the Internet. None of them had ever met each other. Do you know something?”

Horibe grimaced a little.

Shiiba waited patiently.

“The person who sent me these pictures is an old friend. He has a gun shop in Shinjuku called Gambino. He remembered meeting the second man you guys caught with a gun. He checked his customer list and discovered that the guy was a member of his own gun shop. He looked into it some more and found the boy that you caught recently—the unemployed kid? They caught a third person yesterday, didn’t they? A twenty-year-old university student, wasn’t it?”

“You’re not telling me that kid was a member too?”

“Bingo.”

Shiiba’s breathing became erratic as he became more excited. This was big news! This was a clear link between all three cases.

“My friend was feeling stressed out about it, so he sent me an e-mail,” Horibe continued. “He knew he should tell the police, but he was so scared that his shop might get closed down. I told him that I would talk to a detective I know.”

“He hasn’t done anything wrong, so we won’t shut him down,” Shiiba assured Horibe. “We’ll just want to take a look at his shop records and membership details for the investigation. I’m sorry, I’m going to have to report this.”

“Okay. I’ll tell him to expect a visit from the police.”

“Will this ruin your friendship?” Shiiba couldn’t help it, he would have to report this. But he still felt bad that doing so might hurt Horibe.

“It’s fine. He just doesn’t want to get labeled as a criminal. I’ll let him know that that isn’t going to happen. You don’t have to worry.”

“Thanks.”

Shiiba got the address of the store and the owner’s home information, and then he stood up.

“Ugh, it’s cold,” Horibe said as he opened the door to let Shiiba out. A gust of icy wind flowed in.

“Horibe, have things been difficult since this place changed owners?”

“Nah, not much has changed since Mister Andou was in charge. Once a month, Munechika’s secretary comes around, but he just takes a look at the books and then leaves. Never says anything. His name is Kaname or something.”

Kaname was Munechika’s trusted personal assistant. He was a very reserved man—and frighteningly exact. Shiiba didn’t know how old Kaname was, probably younger than Munechika but older than Shiiba. He always wore a high-collared suit and tied his long hair back in a ponytail.

“Oh, but sometimes Mister Kaname takes a look around the shop,” Horibe added. “I always wonder if he’s interested in replica guns or something.”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t look like he would be amused by toys,” Shiiba replied.

Kaname could probably get the real thing easily enough if he wanted to.

Shiiba always felt that there was something hidden under that man's emotionless exterior.

"I'll be back soon," Shiiba grunted. "If you hear anything, let me know."

Horibe nodded. And then, as if he just remembered something, he muttered, "It's been almost a year."

Shiiba didn't have to ask what Horibe was talking about. In November of last year, Andou had been shot dead by the Taiwanese mafia.

Looking up at a passing train on the Ikebukuro line, Horibe got lost in reminiscing. "Sometimes, I see things that remind me of him. Gyoza and takoyaki always bring back memories."

"Memories of Andou?"

Horibe smiled. "Yeah. He would always bring me a little present. He'd stop by on his way home and tell me to contact you if I heard anything interesting. He always said the same thing...he was a bit of a loner, but he was a good guy."

As time passed, the shock of what had happened had subsided for Shiiba, but the pain would never go away completely. Andou had been the perfect S. He had always passed on reliable information to Shiiba. They had also developed an unshakable trust and loyalty for each other.

Horibe was lost in his memories, so Shiiba bid him farewell and walked toward the Ikebukuro station.

Eight years ago, his sister, Yukari, had been caught in a gang shoot-out and died. A year ago, his dear partner, Andou, had been shot. Then, half a year ago, it had been Nagakura, his colleague in COC5.

In a country like Japan, which had such strict gun laws, it was really unusual for one person to know three victims of gun-related crimes. Shiiba knew that it was because of his connections with the criminal underworld. He also knew that he always hunted down guns because he'd been so affected by the deaths of those close to him. He felt trapped by gun-related crimes sometimes. Guns seemed to be everywhere he turned. He hated them.

The hatred fed on itself, resulting in anger and sadness. Consumed by negative emotions, Shiiba kept going, kept pushing forward—but it wasn't a way to live. That much he knew.

But he couldn't stop. He couldn't rest. It was an addiction he couldn't break.

The day would come when he'd have no choice but to stop. He might even welcome that day. Or perhaps...

Chapter 3

Shiiba was walking down the dimly lit street to his apartment in Setagaya when he came to an abrupt stop. There was someone standing at his front door. For a moment, he was ready to run, but when he realized who it was, he relaxed.

“Shinozuka. Why are you here?” he called out.

“Hi, Masaki.”

It was Hideyuki Shinozuka, Shiiba’s sister’s widower.

Shinozuka was also a Metropolitan Police employee, but they had drastically different positions within the organization. Shinozuka was thirty-seven and had an excellent career as the director of the Metropolitan Security Bureau’s Planning Division. Shiiba was a regular detective. He had to show respect to Shinozuka, regardless of their family connection.

“Have you been waiting long? If you’d called me, I would have come to meet you,” Shiiba said.

“I was in the neighborhood,” Shinozuka said. “I was only planning to wait ten minutes to see if you’d turn up.”

Shiiba was worried that something might have happened, but when he searched Shinozuka’s face for any sign of trouble, he saw the man’s typical calm smile.

Shiiba invited Shinozuka in. He boiled water for some tea.

Shinozuka looked slightly surprised by Shiiba’s dull and tiny apartment.

It was only the second time Shinozuka had been here. The first time had been three years ago, when Shiiba moved in. His brother-in-law had come to his housewarming party. At that time, Shiiba had had no clue how to act with Shinozuka. He'd always been a little uncomfortable with his brother-in-law after his sister's death, so he had been slightly upset that Shinozuka had come to his house.

“Here you are.” Shiiba offered the man a cup of tea.

“Thanks.” Shinozuka sat on the floor as Shiiba placed the tea on the low table.

Shinozuka was so calm that, judging by his appearance alone, no one could have known he was an elite member of the police service. However, there was still something rigid about his movements and the way he spoke. Shiiba always found it difficult to completely relax around him. Thankfully, Shinozuka kept his distance, so Shiiba was comfortable enough.

“How is work?” Shinozuka asked. “COC5 must be busy with that gun case.”

“I’ve only just started to work on it.”

After talking about recent events, Shinozuka took out a piece of paper from inside his jacket's pocket and gently placed it on the table. “I want you to look at this and tell me what you think?”

It was a complicated diagram with small letters. They were all words Shiiba was familiar with.

Target

Preliminary Investigation

Behavior Study

Arrangements

Contact

Acquisition

Management

Cultivation

“Is it the stages of cooperative work?” Shinozuka asked. “Cooperative work” was the formal name for S-work.

Shinozuka nodded. “Yeah. This is the basic framework for choosing a cooperator. When you go through your first round of training, we use this. I assumed that this would be the same lecture given to all detectives.”

“Yes, we were told to follow these stages,” Shiiba answered.

“But in the field,” Shinozuka said, “you can’t follow these rules too strictly. I mean, you’ve heard of all the scandals involving detectives over the past few years. It’s not easy to choose and capably manage a cooperator.” As he spoke, his face remained calm, but Shiiba could feel tension filling the room.

He stared at Shinozuka, wondering what his brother-in-law was getting at.

“Don’t be mistaken,” Shinozuka continued. “I’m not criticizing those who work on the streets. The detectives carry out thorough investigations to select a cooperator. You collect an enormous amount of data on one person, then you make a decision about whether he or she would be a good cooperator. The choice is more difficult than it seems. If you’re not careful, you could find yourself saddled with a double-agent.”

The Public Security detectives were Intelligence agents. They had a surveillance network that spread across the entire country and worked to protect the safety of Japan’s society. They were, by nature, a secretive organization. Many parts of the department’s operations were not made public. For this reason, there were a good number of people who objected to their existence. Regardless of these voices of contention, Public Security still operated at the core of Japan’s police force—and required a large budget to do so. Luckily, there were enough people, who understood the essential role that the department played in maintaining Japan’s social stability, to allocate the proper funds.

“You’re not really detectives in the field because you don’t get orders the way other officers do,” Shinozuka went on. “You’re just told to find whoever

can get you the information. It's very, very easy to get burned."

"That's..." Shiiba was at a loss.

Shinozuka was right. His superiors didn't care who he took as a cooperator, as long as he got accurate information. If a potential informant existed, then Shiiba had to work with him or her, no matter who that person was. Sometimes, detectives dropped everything for a new informant. That meant they'd have to drop whoever their cooperator had previously been. "Use them and lose them" was the motto. Handling an S was a very unstable and dangerous line of work.

"If you don't choose a cooperator carefully, then you won't be able to manage that person properly. And you'll put yourself in danger. If a problem arises, then it's not unusual for the police system to abandon not only the cooperator but the detective as well. It seems cruel, but for the stability of the organization, it's a necessary evil. So you need to look after yourself. You can't put yourself at a risk for the sake of a lead. You have to be careful how you manage your relationship with your S." Shinozuka looked at Shiiba pointedly as he spoke.

"You mean, it's bad if your relationship with your S is too close?" Shiiba felt like his heart would stop. Shinozuka's words felt like a blow.

This was why Shinozuka had visited him tonight, to tell him this. Shiiba wanted to hear what Shinozuka knew. Maybe he knew everything about Shiiba's relationship with Munechika.

Shiiba couldn't look away from Shinozuka's intense stare.

"The only person you can protect is yourself. I need you to be extra careful," Shinozuka said. Then, he slowly stood up.

Shiiba finally came back to himself and stood as well, walking the other man to the hall.

Shinozuka put his shoes on and then looked up at Shiiba with a pained expression. "Masaki, I don't want to get in the way of what you do. I'm just worried."

“I understand. Thank you for your concern,” Shiiba said awkwardly, bowing slightly.

After Yukari had been killed, Shiiba had helped with all the arrangements and legal proceedings. Then, he’d rejected Shinozuka’s friendship, unable to face Shinozuka and all the memories of his sister that the man inevitably carried with him. After eight years, he’d finally gotten over those feelings and had been able to meet with Shinozuka again.

He was thankful to Shinozuka for thinking of him. He didn’t want to push him away now.

Shinozuka placed his hand on the doorknob, but he turned around as if he’d forgotten something. “Masaki.”

“Yes?”

But Shinozuka didn’t say anything. Shiiba had never seen Shinozuka like this before. He was frowning so fiercely, as if he was hiding a great secret behind that scowl.

They remained silent for a few moments and then, with a sigh, Shinozuka decided to finally speak. “Something is going to happen soon...with Human Affairs.”

“Huh?” Shiiba didn’t understand. He gazed at Shinozuka, waiting for more information.

“That’s all I can tell you for now. I’m sorry.”

Shinozuka opened the door and left.

Shiiba stood there, looking down at his own feet as he listened to the sound of Shinozuka walking off into the distance.

A change...something would happen...

Human Affairs primarily functioned as a surveillance department. It investigated cases of internal corruption. It was an elite group, composed of the best men. Its people were pros at spying on and following their targets. They would leave no stone unturned. None of the detectives, even at Public Security,

could touch Human Affairs.

Shinozuka was warning him—if Shiiba went too far, Human Affairs would be all over his back. It was indeed a very serious situation and Shinozuka must have risked a lot to tell Shiiba about it. The internal information kept in Human Affairs was top secret. If a leak was discovered, then Shinozuka would be punished severely.

Shiiba jumped into the hallway outside his apartment as if he was a puppet pulled by a string, but Shinozuka was already gone. Shiiba was alone in the empty, dark corridor.



Kuro had told Shiiba to go to a bar on Dougenzaka in Shibuya.

The bar was on the basement floor of a building near the Tokyuu Department Store. When he opened the door, he was greeted by the sounds of George Benson's "Turn Your Love." The atmosphere of the place was quiet, but the clientele was young and rowdy.

Shiiba sat down on a barstool and called out to the bartender—a young man with a Mohawk. "Is a guy called Kuro here?"

The bartender looked Shiiba up and down, shook his head, and said, "He's not here."

Shiiba was a little early, so he ordered a non-alcoholic drink and then took out his packet of cigarettes.

Late last night, Kuro had called, telling Shiiba he knew more about Tomo. Shiiba didn't have much faith that that was even remotely true, but he didn't want to take chances.

"Is Kuro a friend of yours?" the bartender asked. He offered Shiiba a light.

Shiiba took a moment to notice the bartender's many tattoos, and then accepted the lighter. "No, just an acquaintance. I've only met him twice."

"Thought as much." The bartender took the lighter back.

"Why?" Shiiba asked.

"You don't seem his usual sort."

"Oh? What kind of guy is he?"

"Dangerous. You should be careful. Every time he comes here, he causes trouble. Causes a fuss over the smallest things."

Shiiba had seen that for himself at Watanabe's. Kuro had pulled out a knife. It was clear that the young man had quite a short fuse.

Shiiba took a sip of his drink, wondering how to play this right.

"He's here," the bartender said.

Shiiba looked behind him.

A group of three young men dressed up for a night out entered the bar. Kuro led the pack. When he saw Shiiba, he smiled. The two young men behind him weren't the same guys who had accompanied him to Watanabe's.

"Shibano! So good to see you again!"

Kuro sat down next to Shiiba. His companions looked a little disbelieving.

"Is this old guy a friend of yours?" one of them asked Kuro.

"Yep. I asked him to meet me here. I'm on a date now, so scram," Kuro said.

"Don't say that. All four of us can hang out."

"That's all right with you, right?" the other guy asked Shiiba.

"Sorry, I wanna talk to him alone," Shiiba replied.

Kuro smirked. "You heard him. Now get out of our hair. Go home."

"What the hell is this about?" the guy with the long hair asked.

The complaining started. "Come on, Kuro. Let us join you."

It was clear they weren't going to let off easily.

Suddenly, Kuro slapped the guy who had long hair. Then, he kicked the other one in the stomach.

The bartender gave Shiiba a knowing look.

Finally, the two men followed Kuro's orders and left. At first glance, Shiiba thought the men had been friends, but clearly they followed a pecking order.

"Let's get a table," Shiiba said, standing up.

Kuro took a bottle of Singha from the bartender and retreated with Shiiba to a table all the way in the back.

Shiiba got right to the point: "Tell me, then. What did you find out?"

Kuro scowled. "What? Why so quickly? Let's chat first. I want to know more

about you. Don't you think it would be nice to be friends?"

Shiiba wanted to tell Kuro straight out that he had no interest in getting chummy, but he didn't want to annoy Kuro, so he managed a smile. "What do you want to know about me?"

"Let me think...do you have a lover?" Kuro gave him a cheeky grin.

"Why do you ask?" Shiiba needed to keep Kuro sweet.

"Don't tell me you only date older guys. Go out with me. Don't you think I'm a good catch? I have money. I know all the right people. Plus, I'm a really gentle lover." As Kuro spoke, he slowly swayed closer to Shiiba.

Shiiba figured Kuro was just another stupid kid with more money than brains. "Hey, Kuro," he said gently, as if they knew each other intimately, "I'm just not interested in men."

"You're lying. You must sleep with men."

Shiiba immediately scowled. "What makes you think that?"

"You have this sexual vibe going on. It's the way you look. You're just too sexy." Kuro played with the piercing in his ear.

Shiiba didn't really understand what "vibe" Kuro was talking about—and he didn't want to know, either. However, if this was how Munechika saw him too, then he wasn't sure he was happy about it.

Shiiba must have been making a strange expression, because Kuro smacked the table and laughed.

"You don't look sexy pulling that face."

He laughed harder.

Shiiba eyed him suspiciously. "Are you high?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? I don't do drugs. You're funny, so I'm laughing." Kuro was shaking with laughter now. Tears formed in his eyes. He may deny it, but Shiiba was certain he was on drugs.

Shiiba had had to interrogate men who were high before. They had to be cajoled and appeased before they would talk. He didn't like it, but he'd done it over and over again.

"Kuro, can we get to the point?"

Kuro laid his head down on the table as if he was tired of laughing and now wanted to take a nap.

"Tomo's real name? Do you know where I can find him?" Shiiba asked.

Kuro shook his head. "Who knows?"

Shiiba frowned. Kuro wasn't taking this seriously. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know."

Shiiba couldn't control his temper anymore. "Are you screwing with me?!"

Kuro looked surprised. "No, I wouldn't do that to you."

"If you didn't know anything, why did you call me?" Shiiba demanded.

"You must know. I wanted to see you again. You look good even when you're mad."

Shiiba didn't have the energy to argue anymore. He smashed his cigarette into the ashtray.

"Don't be like that," Kuro whined. "I don't know anything more about Tomo, but I know he's going to be at a club. One of my friends called and told me. We could go together. If he's there, then we can talk to him."

"Where is it?"

"A club in Roppongi called Falsare. It's a pretty good place. No annoying kids. I hear celebrities go there too, sometimes."

Shiiba wasn't happy about a direct meeting. But this was a lead, and it meant Shiiba would find out who Tomo was, so he decided to go along with this plan.

They quickly left the bar, and Kuro flagged down a taxi. In a very short time, the taxi stopped in front of a building located in Roppongi.

“This is it?” Shiiba asked.

Stenciled on the door in blue was the word “Falsare.” It wasn’t obvious from the exterior that the building was a club.

“Yeah. Let’s go in,” Kuro said, chewing a gum. He pushed the door open.

Walking through the door, Shiiba saw a line of lights on the floor, illuminating the corridor. At the end of the corridor was a huge wooden door. A large black man stood in front of it.

“Hi, juicy,” Kuro greeted the man.

The black man scowled and muttered something. Shiiba couldn’t quite catch it, but he guessed the man had an issue with Shiiba’s clothes.

“No problem. He’s my guest,” Kuro said in English. He patted the black guy on the shoulder and pushed the door open.

As soon as they entered, Shiiba was overwhelmed by the noise. The base thrummed through his body to his organs. “They have a dress code. Is this really okay?” he asked, indicating his outfit.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re not supposed to get in wearing jeans, but I’m a friend of the owner. He lets me do what I want most of the time.” Putting an arm around Shiiba, Kuro winked.

They paid the entrance fee, and then a staff led them not into the main room but down a corridor. Kuro really was getting special treatment.

They didn’t pass the dance floor, but, instead, were shown the V.I.P. room. Finally, Kuro and Shiiba found a sofa to sit on.

This room was on a mezzanine floor that overlooked the rest of the bar. From here, they could see the whole of the dance floor. The place was packed, and foreigners comprised at least half of the crowd.

Shiiba had been imagining something of a dump. However, the interior of this club was done in an entirely art deco style, and he had to admit it was pretty tasteful. To be surrounded by tacky dance music in such an attractive environment was a jarring juxtaposition.

Kuro's phone rang. "Hello? It's me. I'm in the club. Where's Tomo...? Huh? You're kidding me. Oh well. If you find out anything, call me." He hung up, frowning at Shiiba. "Looks like he went home already. We missed him." Kuro sounded a little dejected.

Shiiba nodded and asked Kuro to contact him if he found out anything else. He didn't have any reason to be here now.

"We came all the way here, so why don't we dance?" Kuro asked him.

"No, I'm going home. You have fun though."

"Don't say that. Stay." Kuro grabbed Shiiba's arm. "If you don't want to dance, then have a drink with me downstairs."

Kuro was an arrogant man. If Shiiba ever wanted to get any information, then he was going to have to play along for a while—that much was clear. So he agreed to one drink and followed Kuro downstairs.

When they got down to the dance floor, people called out to Kuro. White girls. Black guys. Japanese people. Every time someone spoke to Kuro, he would reply with some greeting or joke.

Shiiba sat down at the bar to get another drink, but something captured his interest.

Five men and one woman entered a door in the back of the club. All the men wore suits, but they didn't look like regular businessmen. They had a familiar, oppressive air about them.

If he had seen them in a high-class hostess club, then he wouldn't have thought twice about them. But it didn't seem right for Yakuza to turn up in a dance club.

What caught Shiiba's attention more than anything was the man at the front of the group. He was in his mid-thirties. A young girl hung on his arm. The man was tall and muscular. His hair was long and slightly wavy. He had a handsome face—but he didn't look completely Japanese. The girl had hair that hung down to her waist. She wore a dress decorated with black feathers. All eyes were

glued on them, but they didn't react. To Shiiba, they looked like top models.

The couple looked askance at the dancing crowd then headed straight for the V.I.P. area without saying a word.

Kuro returned and hugged Shiiba from behind. "What are you looking at?"

"Oh, them over there."

Kuro followed Shiiba's line of sight and scowled.

"Do they come here often?" Shiiba asked.

"I see them here once or twice a month," Kuro replied. "The guy in front, he's a relative of the owner. He's really boring. He never comes down to dance, just sits up there and drinks. The woman sometimes dances, but she won't talk to anyone. She dances all on her own. If people try to talk to her, one of those guys she's with scares them off. The regulars know enough to keep away."

Shiiba's need to probe for more info surfaced. "They're Yakuza. Do you know which gang they're affiliated with?"

"How should I know? Oh, wait...when I saw Tomo here last time, he was talking to the Yakuza in the front. They looked pretty close."

It was clear that Kuro had no interest with that line of conversation, but Shiiba wasn't satisfied. He needed to know more about the connection. But he figured asking Kuro wouldn't get anywhere.

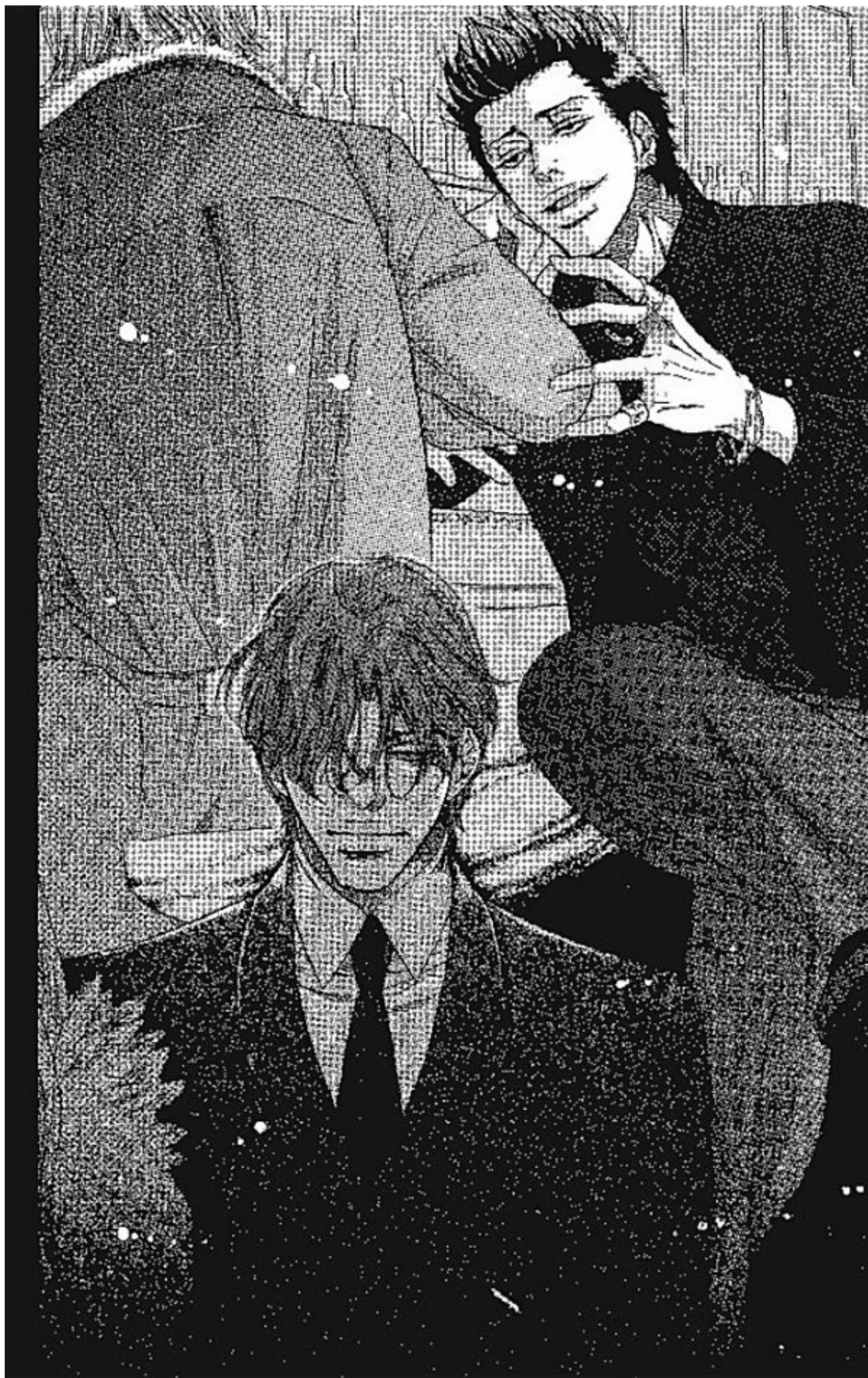
Kuro must have seen the thoughtful look on Shiiba's face. "Mister Shibano, you mustn't go and ask that guy about Tomo. Yakuza are scary. If you're not careful, you can get in big trouble. Why don't you just come to my room instead? We can carry on drinking somewhere more private."

Kuro covered Shiiba's hand with his own, but Shiiba knocked it away. The young man's persistence was starting to get annoying. "I told you already I'm not interested. There's loads of cute guys here. Go for one of them."

"You're so stubborn. I like that about you."

Shiiba's phone beeped. It was a text message, which was a little surprising,

because he rarely got messages. It was his friend, Inose: *I heard something about Yukari. Message me when you have time.*



“Mister Shibano? What’s the matter?” Kuro asked.

“Nothing. A friend has something he wants to talk about.” Shiiba was a bit shaken by the message. He needed to be somewhere quiet, so he went to the restroom on the second floor. As soon as he was alone, he phoned Inose.

“Inose? It’s me. I read your mail. What is it?”

“They discovered something about Yukari’s death,” Inose revealed. “I thought that you would want to know. I don’t want to talk over the phone. Can you come over?”

“A new discovery?” Sweat ran down Shiiba’s forehead. “Got it. I’m in Roppongi, so I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Shiiba hung up. He peered at himself in the mirror for a few minutes. His reflection looked stressed.

It had been eight years since Yukari’s murder.

The case had been closed when the police had apprehended a criminal who confessed to committing the crime. Shiiba wondered what kind of new information could have been discovered.

He splashed cold water on his face to try and calm his nerves. He heard the door open behind him. He looked up into the mirror again and met the eyes of the newcomer.

It was that man. The Yakuza. He wasn’t easily forgettable. No one was with him. He slowly walked toward the sinks.

Shiiba decided that the man must have a high rank in the criminal world. He was calm and composed. For some reason that he couldn’t place his finger on, the man gave Shiiba the creeps. Like something was crawling all over his skin. Shiiba had felt that way before. It was very similar to the first time he’d seen Munechika. Just being in the same room with such a man made it difficult for Shiiba to breathe. It shook him to his very core.

“You don’t look well.” The man had a beautiful voice—masculine, but soft at the same time.

Shiiba shook a little. He hadn't expected the man to talk to him. He watched as the man started washing his beautiful hands.

"If you're not feeling well, I can call one of the staff," the man offered.

Shiiba hesitated. Perhaps the man wasn't trying to be kind. Perhaps he was after something. Shiiba had to be careful.

"No. I'm fine. Thank you, though," Shiiba said, trying to compose himself.

The man flashed Shiiba a smile as he dried his hands. "Take care," he said as he left the restroom.

Shiiba waited a minute before leaving too. He went back to the dance floor and called out to Kuro, "I'm sorry. I have to go."

In order to avoid whatever scene Kuro was going to cause, he turned around and left without waiting for an answer.

"MISTER SHIBANO!" Kuro screamed.

With a sigh, Shiiba turned around.

Kuro was smiling. "I'm going to find out everything there is to know about Tomo! So don't forget me!" He stuck his tongue out. Something on his tongue shined. Shiiba thought it was candy, but it wasn't.

In the middle of Kuro's tongue was a stud with a red jewel.

"Glad you came."

Yuuji Inose's home office was a few blocks south of Sakae Street. The room in the old apartment complex was exactly as Shiiba remembered it—covered in books and papers. There was barely enough room to stand.

Inose welcomed him. "It's been a long time. Come in."

It had been three months since Shiiba had seen Inose.

It was well into November, but Inose was only wearing a t-shirt that revealed his muscular arms. No one could guess Inose was an author just by looking at

him.

“I’m sorry for calling you so suddenly. You were working, weren’t you?”

“I was in the middle of trying to get information out of some pierced little brat.”

“Pierced—?” Inose cut himself off.

Shiiba spotted a small sofa amid the mess and perched himself on one end of it. He felt the heat of someone’s glare. Beside him sat Inose’s mean, female, American short-hair cat. He cleared his throat. “What was it you wanted to talk about?”

“Oh, it’s—the phone’s ringing. Wait a minute.” Inose pushed a pile of papers off his house phone and picked it up. “Yes, is that Mister Iwai? No, I’m sorry. It’s not ready yet. I’ll finish it tonight.”

It sounded like his editor. Shiiba figured that this would take a while, so he went to the kitchen to help himself to some coffee.

In stark contrast to the horrific state of Inose’s room, the kitchen was virtually immaculate. The sink was so clean Shiiba could see his reflection in it. It seemed that Inose was as eccentric as Shiiba remembered him to be.

Inose had been Shiiba’s friend since their university days. In fact, Inose was the only college friend Shiiba had kept in contact with. It wasn’t that they’d been particularly close, but they shared the same views and opinions, so Inose was one of the few people that Shiiba could spend a long time with, despite his antisocial tendencies.

Inose had always planned to be a journalist. After college, he had joined a large newspaper and had been assigned to report on the Metropolitan Police for a time. He then worked for a big television company where he reported on politics. But after forcing some controversial changes to the programming, he fell out with his superiors and decided to do freelance writing. Inose had always felt cheated since then and often complained that the system was never interested in the truth. Shiiba could sympathize with that.

Since going freelance, Inose had conducted research into a wide range of

issues. He was interested in everything from folk traditions to the social issues the Japanese public faced. He didn't have much money, but he'd had a few books published and was making a name for himself as a non-fiction writer.

Inose's writing on folk traditions didn't interest Shiiba much. In all his other works, however, Inose was a ruthless, hard-line reporter. He would always hunt down the truth, while other journalists shied away from it for fear of reprisal. Shiiba admired that.

Shiiba returned to the main room with two mugs of coffee.

Inose was sitting on the sofa apparently finished with his phone conversation. "Sorry," he said, taking a mug out of Shiiba's hand. "Ouch, it's hot!" He screwed up his face and stuck out his tongue. Shaking his head, he finally got down to business. "Where do I start? I think I should give a bit of a background explanation first. Do you have time?"

"Yeah. Just make it easy for me."

"Of course." And Inose started what was clearly going to be a long story. "I've been doing some research on Yakuza. I was writing a report for one of the weeklies. I'm not totally decided on where I'm going to take the story, but I think I'm going to focus on Yakuza in business. Should be a popular story. Just need to get some good, juicy details. 'Course, I can't keep it totally financial—it'll be boring. So, I've been gathering materials on past Yakuza rivalries and the resulting changes in their power structure."

Inose was a bit of an expert on Tokyo's underworld. He'd often found himself in dangerous situations, but that had spurred him on all the more.

"While I was doing my research, I started hearing about this new gang called the Godou Group. They've been stealthily increasing their powerbase. Have you heard of them?"

"Only in name. I know that they're not openly aggressive, but they use money to gain more power," Shiiba said.

"Exactly right. They don't even openly recruit. Slowly, over the past year, I've been working my way in. They had to trust me before they talked about money.

Anyway, Ikkou Society President Kunugi was murdered this year, right? They thought it was the work of the Yagami Group, but actually it was a detective.”

Shiiba swallowed. Nagakura had been shot in front of Shiiba by an Ikkou Society bullet—out of revenge for Kunugi’s death, which had been Nagakura’s work.

“It was a detective from COC5, wasn’t it? Was it an acquaintance of yours?” Inose asked.

“I knew his name and face...why?” Shiiba didn’t really want to know more, but he pushed forward anyway. Nagakura had been a victim of his S-work. The wounds created by Nagakura’s tragic death were still fresh for Shiiba. And it didn’t feel like he’d heal anytime soon.

“When the Ikkou Society lost its head, it was supposed to be incorporated by the Yagami Group. But something happened recently, some kind of quarrel that stopped it. I hear that there’s been some kind of treaty calling for a split of power—and the Yagami Group has accepted it.”

Shiiba had heard that there had been some kind of stalemate, but this was the first he’d heard of reconciliation. “The Kansai Hamane Group supports the Yagami Group. I didn’t think they would back down.”

“They can’t *not* back down. Because the Hamane Group suddenly cut the Yagami Group off. To top it off, the Godou Group is affiliated to the Ikkou Society. The Godou Group is far superior to them, in terms of power. So, I’ve heard that the Ikkou Society now takes orders from the Godou Group. Which means that the Yagami Group has to accept the compromise.”

“The Ikkou Society was so easily subjugated by a newcomer? This is starting to sound like big business power plays...” Shiiba mused.

“I don’t think anyone could have ever guessed that this would happen. It used to be just three organizations. The newcomers are more flexible and ambitious than the old timers. The Godou Group has some real financial muscle. They’re thinking of profits instead of honor...this is just guesswork, but I think there’s a high possibility that the Godou Group is behind the Hamane

Group giving up their plans for Kantou. It would all make sense.”

If what Inose said was true, then the Godou Group had subdued the Ikkou Society and was now pressuring their old rivals, the Yagami Group, effectively wresting power from both.

Shiiba sighed. “While everyone’s preoccupied, they’re moving in. Dirty methods.”

“You’re telling me,” Inose snorted. “I was interested, so I started researching the Godou Group. In the beginning, I found someone who was a bodyguard for the Godou president. Just a hoodlum. He put on a good show, though, and so he was hired as a bodyguard. About a year ago, he was cut off from the crime world. The Godou president is a young man in his mid-thirties called Takanari Godou. He sounds like a very capable man. He has a lot of money and financial assets. I’m not clear on his political leanings, though. I heard rumors that he funded the far left. He’s most likely a very dangerous man. He’s also the child of the Togetsu Group president’s sister. Since the day he was born, he’s lived at the president’s house. The two sons were brought up to be the future leaders of the Togetsu Group.”

“What?” Shiiba couldn’t believe what he was hearing. The person responsible for killing Yukari eight years ago had been caught. He’d been a young member of the Togetsu Group. The Togetsu Group had a wide powerbase but was based in Osaka. At one time, they had been fierce rivals of the Koujin Association—the largest organized crime group in Japan.

Munechika’s gang, the Matsukura Group, was second.

Yukari’s murder investigation had been cleared up quickly after a man from the Togetsu Group came forward, claiming that he had used the president’s son’s gun. However, one of the weekly newspapers had published an article that the president’s son was the true culprit. It looked like the police had accepted the substitute to avoid igniting a full-scale gang war, and to try and bring peace between the Togetsu and Koujin organizations.

The vast majority of articles published in the weeklies were nothing but unsubstantiated trash. After the case was closed, the violence had indeed

stopped. A month later, the two groups had reconciled and become partners. Shiiba himself had been suspicious of the whole thing, but he'd been in college at the time and didn't have any means at his disposal to conduct his own investigation. Shinozuka had adamantly insisted that there had been no mistakes made in the police investigation. But Shiiba could see through it and knew that Shinozuka didn't totally believe the story the cops had come up with. Shiiba couldn't help but feel dissatisfied.

The Togetsu Group had two sons. Back then, Inose had related to Shiiba that the eldest son was in Osaka and the younger son was traveling in America. The only theory that they had to go on was that the person who fired the bullet that killed Shiiba's sister was the president's son. But years passed, and nothing was resolved...

"The president of the Togetsu Group also has a nephew, who might as well have been called the president's son," Inose said.

Shiiba trembled a little in excitement. Finally, after so many years, things were coming together. But there was still more. Inose hadn't finished yet.

"You must have something else to tell me if you called me here," Shiiba gently said.

Inose nodded, getting straight to the point: "Godou is a big fan of guns. Not model guns, the real thing. The pieces in his collection are all engraved."

"Engraved? Y-you mean..."

Shiiba stuttered a little. Part of him yearned to hear more. Another part of him was scared of the answer. If Inose said what Shiiba anticipated he would, then it would open a door. For a long time, Shiiba's heart had been sealed firmly shut—this news might reawaken some of his bitterness.

Shiiba clenched his fists so tight, his nails dug into the palm of his hands. He told himself it would be all right, that he wouldn't let himself get sucked in.

"Shiiba," Inose, looking concerned, called him out of his self-induced trance.

"Sorry. Go on."

“A butterfly. All his guns have a tiny butterfly motif.”

A butterfly.

Shiiba broke out in a cold sweat. All the hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

The gun that had killed Yukari had been engraved—engraved with a butterfly motif. When Shiiba had transferred to Community Safety, he had been able to get into the storage house where all evidence was kept. It had been the first time he’d seen the weapon responsible for taking Yukari’s life.

It had been a well-crafted bootlegged copy of a Colt Bison, decorated with a small butterfly motif. When the police apprehended the man who claimed to have committed the crime, they had asked him how he had obtained the weapon. He would only say that the person he got it from was dead. They were never able to find out more than that.

“Shiiba. However much we find out, we can’t change what happened,” Inose said, picking up his cat. He sat her down on his lap. The cat closed her eyes and enjoyed being petted. “Do you remember that incident where a college kid was run over by a dump truck? The police investigation failed to give his parents the answers that they needed. His parents started a massive campaign for justice and collected tens of thousands of signatures on a petition. It forced the police to re-open the case and bring the criminal to justice. It wouldn’t have happened unless there had been a huge public outcry.”

Shiiba knew it. Only some amazing external pressure would get the police to re-open the case. One voice was simply too easy to ignore.

If Yukari’s murderer was a member of Godou, justice would be a long time coming. Moreover, if there had been some deal behind the scenes, then there was nothing that could be done. Even if Godou turned himself in, the police would try and bury it.

“I’m supposed to bring these criminals to justice, but I’m totally powerless within the system,” Shiiba muttered weakly.

“There’s nothing you can do. It’s the same for Yukari’s husband. Even if he is

at the top of the system—well, it’s exactly *because* he’s at the top of the system that he can’t do anything to about it,” Inose said sympathetically.

Shiiba knew Inose was right. Shinozuka had had to throw away his personal feelings. Shinozuka should have understood how Shiiba felt, but, in fact, the opposite was true—Shiiba could see the world through his brother-in-law’s eyes.

“Inose, I still need to know the truth,” Shiiba said after some thought. He didn’t think he could change anything. He might even lose all hope in the police force for good. But he had to know. He *needed* to know. He had no idea what the future might hold if he learned the answer, but he couldn’t quell the burning desire to know.

“I understand, and I feel the same way. So I’m going to keep looking into it,” Inose promised, sounding resolute.

Shiiba had always been jealous of Inose’s ability to keep going despite everything. People who knew Inose often said he was strange, but at least he would stick to his guns. Shiiba had been considered strange too, back when he’d passed up a great career in order to be a regular officer. However, he had done that for a reason. Inose had his reasons, too. They were free from the restraints of most ordinary people.

“When I was reporting on the Metropolitan Police, I saw so many fallacies hidden by the men who should have been uncovering them. One day, I want to write something that shows the police force for what it is—a big organization hiding in the shadows. I think it would cause a lot of trouble for a lot of people.” Inose grinned.

Shiiba thought that this man just might do it, one day. “If you find anything else out, please let me know.” He stood up.

Inose did the same, still holding his cat. “You know, you’re different.”

Shiiba began putting on his shoes. When he heard that, he laughed. “I heard you say that three years ago.”

“You’re right.” Inose laughed too. “When you were a student, you were so

young and shy. You hardened up when you entered the police force. Now, though, you've changed again."

Inose might have been right. Shiiba had lost his parents when he was in college, but even then, he'd had his sister to look after him. He had been a little timid and introverted as a student. But after Yukari had been killed, the mass media and public attention had overwhelmed him. He'd even felt betrayed by Shinozuka, the one person who should have been on his side. He had known that from then on he was alone, no matter what happened.

Since then, Shiiba had trusted only himself. That was how he lived—alone. To an outsider, it might seem sad and lonely.

"How am I different now?" Shiiba asked. He wanted to know how others saw him.

"I don't know," Inose said. Obviously, he had no good reason to say what he'd said. It was just something he'd felt and blurted out without thinking.

"You must have some idea?" Shiiba prompted.

"You're just different," Inose replied. "I don't know...you just seem more relaxed. But at the same time, you don't seem happy. It's sort of scary."

"Scary?"

Shiiba wasn't really sure what Inose was getting at. Inose seemed unable to explain it himself.

Shiiba walked out of Inose's apartment building and made his way down the dark streets, his mind full of thoughts. He must have changed around the time that he'd met Munechika. Before then, he hadn't been able to let anyone in. He had trusted his old partner, Andou, but he had never been able to be entirely honest. Andou had been used to Shiiba's ways and hadn't pushed him.

Munechika had been different. He'd managed to work his way into Shiiba's heart, delving into the places that Shiiba had wanted to keep hidden. Munechika had been relentless in bringing Shiiba out of himself. The man wouldn't just stand by. He got involved. Munechika didn't mind if Shiiba was

angry or happy, so long as he felt something. Munechika had softened Shiiba's heart. Shiiba's pride had been broken, and he had finally faced up to his own weaknesses.

Inose's words repeated in Shiiba's head: *"You just seem more relaxed."*

Shiiba had managed to make his weaknesses into strengths. Perhaps this change of heart showed on his face.

Being with Munechika worked for Shiiba. Their relationship involved strengths and weaknesses mixing together. Like a chemical reaction, something between the two of them had been created. What the creation was, exactly, Shiiba didn't really understand. But now, he didn't think that his negative emotions were necessarily a bad thing. He accepted everything he was feeling and used it to make himself stronger.

Shiiba remembered Munechika telling him how he would never be able to get enough of Shiiba. He wanted to see Munechika now. He needed Munechika—not as a detective, but as a man, as a lover.

That was why he *couldn't* meet Munechika. He mustn't meet his S feeling like this.

He was once again trapped in his complicated feelings.

Shiiba looked up. There wasn't a single star in the sky.

Chapter 4

The next day, Shiiba received a call from his superior, Takasaki, and so he found himself heading toward Shibuya again. When he entered the Intelligence Team's room, which was located in a building that Matsuda's team used as a secret meeting point, Takasaki met him.

He was informed that when the Incidents Team had performed a search of Gambino Gun Shop in Shinjuku, the owner had gone willingly to the police station and answered their questions.

"All of the shop members' details were recorded on a disk," Takasaki told him. "Among them were the e-mail addresses of the men that we've already apprehended, but we're still not clear how their personal contact information was leaked."

"The owner doesn't know anything?" Shiba asked.

"The owner is clean. There are lots of part-time workers there, though, and they change frequently. The Incidents Team is going to follow up by looking into the employees' details."

Shiiba reported that he had met with Kuro.

Takasaki warned him to be careful. He looked tired.

"Shall we get some coffee?" Shiiba asked.

Takasaki declined with a shake of his head. He was looking intensely at something on the table. "Shiiba."

"Sir?"

“Aren’t you tired?”

“Huh?” Shiiba was a little surprised by this question.

“S-work. COC5. Being in a career with no prospects—despite graduating from Tokyo University. You’re always the one who brings in the leads. Information just seems to *find you*. Even Matsuda knows it. But people only see results, not the men behind them.”

Shiiba had no idea what this was leading to. “Do I look tired?”

Takasaki grimaced. “No, I’m sorry. I said too much. I’m the tired one...ever since that thing with Nagakura, I’ve been finding it so hard to keep going. I’m getting too old for all this.”

There had been a substantial amount of criticism aimed at Takasaki after the Nagakura incident. Some might have considered it fortunate that he had been allowed to keep his job with only a cut in pay, but it had all still taken an emotional toll on the man.

“It shouldn’t have happened,” Takasaki added. “You know, I was a good officer on the field.”

Even if a non-career officer managed to make progress, there was a glass ceiling. This guaranteed that no one would ever surpass the section head. Takasaki had gotten that far, and his career was a success in that respect. But it had taken a toll on him.

“Sir.”

“What is it?”

Shiiba wanted to ask advice on his investigation, but then he wondered if Takasaki was the right person to speak to. He decided he’d consult Shinozuka instead. “It’s nothing. You should rest.”

“Yes. Thanks for all your hard work.” Takasaki’s words, although spoken with solemnity, lacked their usual strength. The man turned around and trudged out of the room.

Shiiba hadn’t managed to spot anyone tailing him, yet. He knew they would

—soon. They'd be looking for any dirt on him. Adultery, corruption, debts —anything that could be potentially dangerous to police work.

If Human Affairs had started an investigation, it usually signaled the end of a career. As soon as they had evidence of any infraction, the officer would be forced to retire. If the officer refused, he would be threatened with disciplinary action. If fired, the officer would have to leave without retirement money or a pension, so very few people chose to defend their position.

In reality, Human Affairs didn't exist to solve problems. It forced people to retire. If the issue of the officer did become public knowledge, the police force wouldn't have to claim any responsibility, as the person in question had already left. The system wasn't really intended to keep the police force clean from corruption, it was merely a defense mechanism.

Just because Shiiba held a special role as an undercover agent who conducted S-work didn't mean he was beyond the reach of Human Affairs. Of course, he was permitted to proceed with certain—technically illegal—activities in order to retain his cover. However, corruption, such as drug dealing and accepting bribes, was strictly prohibited. If Human Affairs found any evidence that he was doing those, then he'd be history.

Shiiba couldn't think of a reason why they'd suspect him of corruption, though. The only possible issue could be his close relationship with Munechika.

Meeting with your S wasn't a problem, but a physical relationship wasn't officially sanctioned. However, the only people who really knew about their relationship were himself, Munechika, and Munechika's secretary, Kaname. Kaname was completely loyal to Munechika, so Shiiba was confident he hadn't leaked their secret. So, there must be another reason for the investigation.

Shiiba went to write up his report. He couldn't think straight, though. He could only think about what Human Affairs had in store for him.

As soon as Shiiba got on the Oedo line, he sensed that something was wrong. He slowly started to move from the middle car to the front of the train.

When he casually glanced over his shoulder, he saw that a man in a trench coat was doing exactly the same thing. However, the man stopped in the car next to Shiiba's rather than move forward.

The man could have been any other businessman, but Shiiba saw through the ruse straight away.

That man was watching him. Shiiba wondered how long he had been tailed. He hadn't noticed anything when he'd left his apartment.

He heard that investigators usually worked in teams. One would keep watch on the officer's house and then contact another investigator who would be waiting at the nearest station. That was probably how this man started to follow Shiiba.

The train pulled into the station. Shiiba waited until only one second was left before the doors shut, and then he leapt off the train. In the next second, the train left for the next station—the man in the trench coat still on board. Shiiba headed for Sentagaya station on the Soubu line. He turned back, passed Shibuya, and got off at Ogikuba.

He walked for about ten minutes then stopped in front of a silent house. After checking that he wasn't being followed, he put the key in the lock.

This was Munechika's home. The property deeds were in someone else's name, but he knew that Munechika used it as a safe-house whenever it was necessary. Those occasions were rare, but the place was furnished with everything he'd need.

Once, when there had been trouble with a Chinese trader, Shiiba had been taken here. At that time, Munechika had given Shiiba a key and told him he could use it whenever he wanted. This was the first time Shiiba had needed to resort to it.

Shiiba was supposed to be receiving information tonight from Munechika, but he couldn't go to Roppongi Hills now. The investigators probably knew that Munechika was Shiiba's S, this late in the game.

They might even be watching Munechika's apartment at this very moment.

Shiiba sat down at the dining room table and called Munechika on his cell phone.

“Shiiba? What’s up?”

He told Munechika where he was. That was enough for Munechika to know that something was wrong. When Munechika probed him for more information in a voice close to a whisper, Shiiba would only answer, “Sorry. I don’t think it’s serious, but if you come here, you need to be careful that you’re not being followed.”

“Got it.”

As soon as Shiiba hung up, he felt unhappy that he’d said or done anything. His troubles had nothing to do with Munechika. He shouldn’t have involved his S.

Angry, Shiiba beat his fists down on the table. He stood up, walked into the living room, and collapsed on the sofa. Closing his eyes, he began to consider the situation.

If his relationship with his S was proper, then they wouldn’t meet up as often as they did. The two of them had crossed the line, making their situation even more dangerous.

Shiiba slumped over and reprimanded himself silently. Munechika was formally registered as his S. That meant Munechika could meet freely with Shiiba, safe in the knowledge that he would not be charged with criminal offences. This excuse disguised their guilt and made the time they spent together seem more normal. It was his job, after all, to collect information from his S.

Every time Shiiba played that reasoning in his mind, though, he kept feeling more and more depressed. He tried to breathe slowly, but the stress of the day had taken its toll on him. He fell into a disturbed sleep.

He dreamed. In his dream, he was walking down the street with Nagakura.

“Nagakura, are you feeling better?”

“Don’t I look better? I’m on top of the world.” Nagakura shrugged his shoulders and took a drag on his cigarette.

“How is Mao?” Shiiba asked.

“He’s well. Why don’t we all go for dinner sometime? He asked about you too.”

Nagakura would never say anything like that so Shiiba knew this couldn’t be real. Still, just the idea that they could share a meal again put a smile on his face.

“Nagakura, I might have found the man who really killed my sister.”

“Really? That’s great.” Nagakura still wore a cynical smile, even in Shiiba’s dreams.

“Can you say it to me again? The thing you told me...in the end...”

Shiiba remembered. He remembered what happened at the end. He remembered telling Nagakura that he wouldn’t make the same mistake.

“Oh, look at the time. I have to go now. See ya!” When they got to a crossroads, Nagakura suddenly took a right.

“Nagakura!” Shiiba called out to stop him, but Nagakura acted as if he hadn’t heard. “Wait! Nagakura!”

Shiiba couldn’t follow the other man. He couldn’t go that way. Panicked, he tried to run after him.

Nagakura turned around. With a fierce, almost demonic expression, Nagakura yelled at him: “GO BACK! YOU HAVE TO GO THAT WAY!”

Shiiba stopped in his tracks.

“You have to keep going until you get to the end.” Nagakura’s expression started to soften again.

Suddenly, a man dressed entirely in black appeared. He had no face. He fired a few shots at Nagakura.

“NAGAKURA!” Shiiba screamed.

Shiiba was having the same nightmare all over again. The pool of blood under Nagakura’s body spread, staining the street. The red liquid edged toward Shiiba’s feet. A rivulet of blood moved like a dark red snake that was possessed, trying to wrap itself around Shiiba’s legs.

“Ngh!”

It made his skin crawl. Shiiba was experiencing true terror. Then, he heard a metallic sound. It felt as if his head was being hit by a hammer...

Shiiba woke up.

The strange noise persisted. Slowly, the annoying sound quieted, fading, and then disappeared. Shiiba realized it had been the blood in his veins. He had been hearing the pounding of his own blood in his ears.

Shiiba looked at his watch. He must have been asleep for about two hours. The day was coming to an end.

Someone was in the kitchen and he smelled something delicious. He stood up to investigate.

“How long have you been here?” Shiiba asked.

Munechika was stirring something in a pot. He’d taken off his jacket and tie, his sleeves were rolled up. “About thirty minutes. You were sleeping so soundly, I decided not to disturb you...you must be hungry. It’s just about done.”

“You made it?” Shiiba couldn’t hide his surprise.

“Yep,” Munechika replied.

He served the food at the table.

“I thought you had cooked me something amazing. This is just pasta with some sauce over it!” Shiiba said.

“Best homemade food there is. Now eat up, before it gets cold.” Munechika poured some wine into Shiiba’s glass and nodded to begin eating.

Shiiba wrapped the pasta around a fork and then pushed it into his mouth. “Delicious.”

It really was good—better than Shiiba had expected. The pasta wasn’t too soft, and the tomato sauce was exactly to his taste.

“You should thank Kaname. He’s very picky when it comes to food. He always does the shopping.”

Shiiba knew that Munechika had to be joking. Still, the image of Kaname standing in a shopping aisle, carefully choosing the right kind of tomato sauce made Shiiba laugh.

He was still upset by his nightmare, which had embodied all of his fears and anxieties, but seeing Munechika act completely normal calmed Shiiba a little.

It was quiet here. Time seemed to pass slowly. It was a nicely decorated place, but it didn’t have the same sterile feel that Munechika’s luxurious apartment did. Having simple food in a normal house was strangely relaxing.

When they finished eating, Munechika finally asked, “What happened?” His tone was quiet and measured.

“Nothing.”

Now that he had relaxed, Shiiba didn’t feel like talking about it.

“How can you say that? You told me you were being followed.”

Shiiba knew he had to answer somehow. “I’m sorry. I was being too jumpy. There isn’t a problem.”

“Liar. Are you trying to hide something from me?” Munechika scowled fiercely.

Shiiba sighed. He hadn’t wanted to deceive his S. “Human Affairs is following me.”

Munechika looked searchingly at Shiiba. “You’re under surveillance? Why?”

“I don’t know,” Shiiba answered.

Munechika looked even more pained.

“Is it because of me?” he muttered.

“No. You’re my S. It can’t be because of you.”

“Let’s stop meeting for a while,” Munechika suggested.

Shiiba frowned at Munechika. “Why?”

“Obviously, for your sake. I can phone you to give you information. I could get Kaname to meet you, check how you’re doing...”

“No. I won’t let this happen. It’s my job to meet you and gather the information!” Shiiba yelled, striking his fist on the table.

Munechika’s gave him a pained smile. He was always so calm and authoritative. He always managed to hide his fears and worries. He could always handle himself.

Shiiba wasn’t in any position to tell Munechika what to do. “Where do you get your strength from?” he muttered.

“I was born with it.” But Munechika understood how Shiiba felt and didn’t press the issue any further.

After they had cleared up the dishes, Munechika passed on what he had discovered. “I have some information on the bootlegged guns.”

“Tell me.”

“First, come take a shower with me.”

Shiiba pouted, but Munechika just gave him a cheeky smile.

“What’s the matter? Isn’t sleeping with me part of your job too? We can talk all about it in bed.”

“Damn. You never give up,” Shiiba whined a little, then stood up with some enthusiasm.

Just as promised, Munechika told Shiiba the details about the bootlegged guns.

The boss of a construction company called Yasuo Maruoka was selling them. He wasn't affiliated to any particular crime organization, but he did have links with the criminal underworld in the past and so he was pretty well known in that circle. Apparently, Maruoka's company, Asahi Construction, was infamous for putting its laborers' lives in danger, due to various breaches of labor laws.

Maruoka had probably started selling guns to criminals this summer. His bootlegged guns were better than the real thing. His services extended to maintenance and repair. If a buyer paid extra, the gun could even be customized.

"If we conduct a covert investigation, then we'll probably be able to find out who's making the guns," Shiiba muttered to himself.

Then, Munechika said something strange. "You won't be able to investigate Maruoka."

"Why? Is he that careful?"

"It's not that." Munechika shrugged. His fingers worked on Shiiba's shoulders, gently massaging away the tension. "Maruoka was hit by a car and killed last night. You can't spy on a dead person."

Furious, Shiiba batted Munechika's hands away. "Why didn't you tell me?!"

"I just did! Why are you so angry?"

From Munechika's point of view, it didn't matter if the man was killed or murdered. But to Shiiba, the man had been his one and only chance to solve the case.

"When is the funeral?" Shiiba demanded.

Munechika frowned.

"The day after tomorrow... hey, you can't seriously be thinking of going?"

Shiiba stared back at Munechika suspiciously. "What's the matter with

going? Other people involved in the sales of bootlegged guns might attend as well. I just want to check it out. Where is it?”

Munechika didn't say anything. Instead he sat up, pulled a robe over his naked body, and stood up.

“Hey, Munechika.” Shiiba wasn't about to let this opportunity go.

“You're not going. He may not have been a big mafia name, but he wasn't much different from Yakuza. All the people there are going to be criminals. It's no place for an undercover detective.” Munechika left the room.

Shiiba could tell that Munechika was in no mood to give him what he needed. Left alone on the bed, he ran his fingers through his hair.

Munechika had told him not to go. He knew that Munechika was only worried about him. But Shiiba had to do something. He had to break the stalemate. He had to work out a plan.

Shiiba walked down Hanamichi Street, which crossed Kabukicho. However, he soon found himself blocked by a group of people standing outside a residential building. He tried to catch a glimpse of what was going on. It looked like there had been a raid on a gang office.

There were plenty of criminal organizations' offices in this area. Illegal parking outside these offices had caused quite a problem lately, so this crackdown was really welcomed by the area's residents.

Shiiba was about to walk on when he heard a familiar voice. “Hey. Come out here.”

A uniformed officer dragged out a Yakuza gang member. The officer was Asakawa. Asakawa noticed Shiiba too, but he only gave a passing glance before he moved out of sight. Shiiba knew every inch of Kabukicho like the back of his hand—and that knowledge included the other officers who operated there. Asakawa knew better than to draw attention to an officer in Shiiba's position.

Shiiba hadn't had to walk too far before Asakawa phoned him.

Asakawa started by asking if there was somewhere they could talk without being noticed. Shiiba glanced around and gave him the name and address of a nearby café, then hung up.

He only had to wait in the dingy, windowless café for a few minutes before Asakawa joined him.

Asakawa quickly glanced around the place and, after deciding that the few guests there weren't going to cause a problem, sat down next to Shiiba.

They ordered coffee. After it arrived, Asakawa spoke. "Masaki, I'm sorry."

"No problem. You were busy. What are you taking them in for?"

Asakawa was part of COC4, whose main target was organized crime. He also associated with some of the higher ups in the force, and he was a friend of Shinozuka's.

"The gang's boss is suspected of fraud."

"Did you get results?"

"Weapons and drugs. We picked up quite a haul."

For once, Asakawa wasn't sporting his usual stubble. He was uncharacteristically clean shaven. His white shirt was still a little off-color and his suit was full of creases, though. Shiiba knew that Asakawa was simply too busy with work to care about such minor details. Still, Shiiba couldn't help but think that if he would take a little more care with his personal appearance, Asakawa could be quite an attractive man. He was probably about thirty-seven—the same age as Shinozuka, but they were totally different in appearance and behavior.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Shiiba asked as he lit a cigarette.

"Yeah, I did." Asakawa looked away. "You're being watched, aren't you?"

Shiiba's first reaction was one of surprise, but he quickly realized that Shinozuka must have told Asakawa. It seemed Shinozuka let his guard down around his closest friends.

“I was careful when I came in. I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary.”

Asakawa smiled. “They must be having a hard time keeping tabs on you.”

To mark Shiiba, who worked in the gray areas of the law, was no easy task. To really predict Shiiba’s movements would probably require twenty-four hour surveillance.

“You’re very calm about all this. Most detectives would be nervous wrecks at the mere suggestion that they were being watched.” Asakawa sounded tired. He took a large gulp of coffee.

“I’ve got nothing to hide, so why should I be worried? If they can’t get anything on me, then they can’t do anything.”

“You’re right...but have you met with Shino recently?” Asakawa asked urgently.

“I met him late last night,” Shiiba replied, curious.

“How was he?” Asakawa asked. It was an odd question.

“What do you mean? He’s like he always is.”

“Right...” Asakawa trailed off and crossed his arms.

“Has something happened to him?” Now Shiiba was worried.

“No, it’s not that something has happened. He’s just been acting strange lately. He’s jumpy and moody. He flares up at the smallest thing, but then when he should be angry, he acts like a Buddha.”

These words came from a close friend who had known the man for a long time, so Shiiba took them seriously.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen him like this,” Asakawa went on. “He entered the head office’s Personnel Department a little while ago, and I heard that there were sparks between him and the boss there.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t really know the details. I just heard parts of it from an acquaintance

in the Second Division. Apparently there's been a bit of ... friction."

"Because of me?"

Shinozuka couldn't object to surveillance based on his personal feelings, but he could still be anxious about it.

"It might have a connection, but I think that things are more complicated than that. Anyway, I hear that you're chasing those bootlegged guns?"

Asakawa changed the topic so quickly that Shiiba didn't have the chance to probe any further.

"Yeah. You think someone in COC4 is working on the case too?"

"Well, we don't know if Yakuza are involved yet. We're keeping an eye on the situation."

"Do you know Maruoka of Asahi Construction?" Shiiba inquired.

Asakawa's face changed immediately into the mask of a detective. "You know about him?"

"I suspect that he's involved in the gun sales, so I'm trying to find out as much as I can. It might not have anything to do with you, though." Shiiba tried to play down his interest in Maruoka, worried that he might be treading into COC4's territory. "Do you think the hit-and-run accident was murder?"

"We're investigating all possibilities," Asakawa revealed. "There weren't any signs at the scene that the car had even bothered to brake, so it's reasonable to assume that he was murdered. This was a man involved with several criminal organizations, and it's very likely that he got caught up in some kind of trouble. However, selling guns? That's the first I've heard of that. Where did you find this out?"

Shiiba didn't answer straight away.

"Munechika?" Asakawa suggested grimly. "I'd like to meet him one day. Quiz him on some stuff. He always seems to know what's going on. I bet he'd be able to help my team too."

Shiiba suddenly remembered his conversation with Inose. “Apparently the Ikkou Society and the Yagami Group have reconciled.”

“Yeah. Strange, isn’t it? It’s really shaken up the balance of power within the gangs. Groups that have been fighting like cats and dogs are now working together. The smaller organizations that were under the big umbrella are now part of other organizations. To be honest, we really can’t keep up with all these changes.”

If what Inose said was true, then everything was connected with the Godou Group. COC4 was full of detectives experienced with the inner workings of the criminal world and they should have had a good grasp of the situation, but for some reason, Asakawa hadn’t even mentioned the Godou Group. COC4 must not have been able to grasp the extent of the Godou Group’s power yet, Shiiba surmised.

It was all getting to be a bit too much for Shiiba, as well. He was finding it difficult to think. His mind was blank. His body was operating on automatic. When he left Asakawa, he walked aimlessly through the streets.

He took a left on Kuyakusho Street and another left at Golden Street. It was midday so there weren’t many people out. He turned the corner; on the left hand side, he could see Hanazono Police Box. He knew that meant he was leaving the Shinjuku district and entering the Yotsuya district.

Shiiba climbed the stairs in front of him. He was now standing at the compound walls of Hanazono shrine. He walked around and entered the holy grounds.

The place was deserted. Not a person was in sight. It was almost time for the annual open-air-festival. The decorations and tables were already lined up in preparation for the festivities. The place would be bustling with vendors and tourists soon. It was one of Shinjuku’s seasonal traditions to welcome December this way. Every year, over 600,000 visitors came to the shrine.

Shiiba didn’t have any particular religion, but he had come all this way, so he dropped some change into the donation box and then put his hands together to pray.

Shiiba bent his head. He was feeling really mixed up about everything. Maruoka. The Godou Group. Shinozuka was acting so strangely that even Asakawa was worried.

But, no matter what happened, Shiiba had to put his investigation as his first priority. He thought back to what Kuro had said. The brat had boasted that his friend could get as many guns as he wanted. He could have been talking about Maruoka. If that was the case, then why was Maruoka killed? Perhaps there had been some sort of trouble over selling the guns...

Shiiba had too few cards. Everything he had to go on was just speculation. He couldn't tie all the loose ends together. He needed something more concrete.

Chapter 5

Shiiba got out of the taxi just before reaching his destination. He thought that he'd lost the man tailing him, but Shiiba looked around to be sure.

After walking for five minutes, he saw a funeral hall up ahead. Today was the funeral of Asahi Construction's President, Maruoka Yasuo.

There was still some time before the ceremony would begin. The black-clad mourners were gathering under the tents outside. Shiiba passed by the guestbook and mingled with the other mourners.

For a company president's funeral, an extraordinary number of the men attending were very muscular. Shiiba kept his ears perked up to catch the whispered rumors floating around.

"It was a hit-and-run?"

"I heard that they still haven't found who did it."

"He had enough enemies who would have liked to see him dead."

"You mean it was murder?"

He looked at the names on the cards attached to the flowers. One of them stood out—a card with the name "Tokujyuurou Yoshizawa." Shiiba thought he'd heard the name before, but he couldn't remember where.

As he was racking his brain for an answer, someone grabbed his arm from behind. Instinctively, Shiiba began to push back, but then he saw that it was someone he knew.

"Come this way, please. The boss asked for you." The large man who had

bent over to whisper in Shiiba's ear was one of Munechika's employees. His name was Saikawa. Shiiba had met him several times before.

He followed Saikawa to the funeral hall's parking lot. Munechika was in the backseat of a black Benz. Saikawa opened the door and Shiiba slipped in next to his S.

"I didn't know you were attending the funeral. If you had said—"

Munechika cut Shiiba off. "Are you an idiot?"

Shiiba glowered at suddenly being called an idiot.

"I told you not to come," Munechika continued. "It's ridiculous for you to be at Maruoka's funeral. It's too much of a risk."

"If I mingle, then no one will know," Shiiba reasoned out. "And, anyway, there aren't any detectives who know my face."

"This is your disguise?" Munechika grabbed Shiiba's glasses and then messed up his combed-back hair.

Shiiba shook his head and tried to push Munechika away. "Get off! I'm not going to sniff around. I won't be suspicious. I just want to take a look."

"You always attract attention. You have to know that." Munechika was being really aggressive. Shiiba could tell that he was really mad this time. "Kaname, you stay here. Look after this darling princess of ours."

"Sir." Kaname was sitting in the driver's seat of the car. He nodded his acknowledgement.

Saikawa immediately opened the door for his boss. Munechika got out of the car. He then reached into Saikawa's pocket and pulled out a pair of sunglasses, which he threw at Shiiba. "Stay here until I get back. If you try to step one foot out of this car, I swear I'll punish you."

Shiiba put on the glasses, about to bicker, when he was caught off guard by Munechika's smile.

"Why are you smiling?!" Whenever the other man pulled this sort of thing,

Shiiba really lost it.

“You look sexy dressed in all black. I could take you now.”

Shiiba thought about screaming some obscenities, but Munechika was already outside and Saikawa was closing the door.

“Pervert,” Shiiba muttered to himself. When he looked up, he caught Kaname looking at him through the rear view mirror. “Kaname, do I stand out?”

“Yes. Especially somewhere like this.” Kaname’s response was so immediate and straightforward that it didn’t really leave Shiiba any room to argue.

When the ceremony started, the mourners started to filter into the funeral hall. Soon after, Shiiba could hear speeches coming out of the loudspeakers.

“Did Munechika know Maruoka?” Shiiba asked.

When Shiiba had spoken with Munechika about Maruoka before, he hadn’t been able to guess whether the two had a personal relationship.

“They never met face to face,” Kaname answered, “but the former Matsukura Group president was very friendly with Maruoka. The boss is here today to honor that relationship, as the current president is currently indisposed.”

Shiiba asked why the president couldn’t attend, but Kaname shook his head. “I don’t know. That young man is very selfish.”

It was a very rare moment when Kaname said what he truly felt. It seemed that Kaname didn’t think much of Munechika’s half-brother.

“Maybe he doesn’t like funerals?” Shiiba suggested.

“I couldn’t answer for him...” Kaname dodged.

“Kaname, how long have you known Munechika?” Shiiba wanted to take this chance to learn more about his S.

“It’ll be eighteen years this year.”

Shiiba thought he must have misheard so he repeated, “Eighteen years?”

Kaname nodded.

“You’ve been with Munechika since he was fifteen. I know it’s rude to ask, but how old are you?”

“I’m three years older than the boss.”

Shiiba was surprised. He had thought that Kaname was much older than that.

“When the Matsukura Group was increasing its powerbase, there were a lot of fights with the other groups. The old president’s wife was very worried about the boss even so much as walking around outside. I was hired as his bodyguard, and that’s how I came into his service.”

The president’s wife gave birth to their legitimate son, Motoaki. That she would care about her husband’s mistress’ child made Shiiba believe she had been a very kind woman. “The former president’s wife, where is she now?”

Kaname sighed a little. Shiiba could sense that he was feeling a little uncomfortable. “She passed on, unfortunately.”

“I see.” Shiiba wanted to ask more questions, but he hesitated to pry when the person in question was no longer alive. He didn’t want their conversation to stop cold. Even though Shiiba always said he wasn’t in love, it was at times like these that he knew in the bottom of his heart that Munechika was special to him. Everyone had faith in themselves and were weak when confronted with their heart’s desire.

The heart had many walls. Walls kept true feelings in. Walls hid those feelings from any upsetting news. Walls helped to maintain a calm mind. He knew this, but he couldn’t stop lying to himself. He couldn’t stop hiding from what he truly felt.

The ceremony was soon over, and the coffin was carried out. The mourners also started to leave once the hearse had departed. Munechika and Saikawa returned to the car.

Saikawa opened the door for his boss.

“Munechika.” A man standing close by stopped Munechika before he could

get in. Three large men stood behind the stranger. “It’s been a while.”

Shiiba inspected them from behind the protection of his sunglasses. It was the same man he had met at the club Kuro had taken him to. The man was in a black suit, but he still stood out from the crowd.

“You’re here instead of Motoaki?” the man asked Munechika.

“What if I am?” Munechika replied.

Shiiba could see immediately that Munechika wasn’t happy at seeing this particular person.

The man ignored Munechika’s obvious contempt. He just smiled and pushed both hands into his pockets. “He hasn’t been working much recently, I hear. He’s sulking because you never see him. He’s always admired you.”

Based solely on outward appearances, anyone would have believed this handsome man with his soft voice and gentle smile had nothing but good intentions—a perfect gentleman. But when Shiiba looked carefully, he could see something dark lurking behind those eyes. The stranger wasn’t a normal man. There was something evil about him.

“I hear you’re doing a good job in my place. You must be tired from babysitting him all the time,” Munechika snapped back.

“I like him. He’s a good kid. I don’t think I could ever get bored of him. I think he likes me too. You don’t have to worry. Even if the Matsukura Group throws him out, I’ll still look after him.”

Saying such a thing was simply outrageous.

“Don’t be so arrogant. Even if you are friends with Motoaki, the Matsukura Group is never going to deal with you. Don’t get ahead of yourself.” Munechika’s tone of voice was calm and deliberate, but Shiiba could sense the barely contained rage it carried.

“What are you saying? You’re the one who should be careful. He’s quite astute when it comes to you. He knows that you’ve been spending all your time with your new toy. If I were you, I’d keep that plaything under lock and

key...who knows what Motoaki will do if he gets his hands on it.”



Munechika hadn't reacted so far, but now his face creased in absolute fury.

The man glanced over at Shiiba, eyeing him up and down. “Men really are pitiful creatures. Always looking for new toys.” The man ignored the change in Munechika’s demeanor and continued, seemingly unafraid as he appraised Shiiba. His eyes were a pale brown, almost as if their color had been diluted. They betrayed his callous nature.

Shiiba couldn’t tell if the man remembered him or not.

Munechika got into the car, which broke the staring contest. Saikawa closed the door behind Munechika and then got into the front passenger seat.

Kaname drove off.

“Who was that?” Shiiba asked.

There had been something about that man—something oppressive. Something even Munechika couldn’t wave aside with a smile. Shiiba had noticed it the first time they’d met in that club bathroom. He wanted to know more.

Munechika didn’t speak straight away. He had his arms folded and his eyes closed as if he were in deep thought.

“Munechika?” Shiiba prompted.

“Takanari Godou. President of the Godou Group.”

Shiiba shivered a little. His heart began beating fast, and he could feel goose bumps breaking out over his skin.

Godou—the man who may have murdered Yukari.

“Shiiba?” Munechika had noticed Shiiba’s strange reaction and frowned. “Is something the matter?”

“It’s nothing.” Shiiba turned his head to look out the window, but not one bit of scenery registered to him.

“I’ll say goodbye now.” Kaname saw Munechika and Shiiba safely to the

apartment, said farewell at the door, and left.

As soon as they were alone, the tension dispersed. Even standing up felt too difficult a task. Weak, Shiiba collapsed onto the sofa.

“Shiiba, you know Godou?” Munechika asked, loosening his tie. He sat down next to Shiiba and waited.

Shiiba didn’t know where to start. He didn’t have the strength to choose the right words. “Eight years ago, my sister was caught up in a gun fight and killed.”

“It was a stray bullet from a gun belonging to a member of the Togetsu Group, wasn’t it?”

Shiiba looked over at Munechika, shocked. “You knew?”

“When I first saw you with Andou, I did a little investigating of my own.”

“I see. You must have looked around a lot. That was eight years ago.” Shiiba was surprised that Munechika knew so much about the case.

“I discovered the connection to your brother-in-law, then I read up on the rest. Well, I didn’t have to investigate much. Even I remember the case where an officer’s wife was killed by Yakuza. It was big news at the time.”

Shiiba didn’t want to think that Munechika knew about his past. His S hadn’t mentioned it, not even once. But that was probably because Munechika wanted to avoid causing Shiiba any unnecessary pain.

“What does that have to do with Godou?”

Shiiba told Munechika what he had found out from Inose.

Munechika was silent for a while. Then, he said, “Godou was indeed raised in the Togetsu Group president’s house. He also likes guns and butterflies. But I don’t think he was in Japan at that time.”

“What?” Shiiba stared at Munechika.

“When Godou graduated from Tokyo University, he went to Hong Kong immediately. He made a lot of money on the futures market, there. He’s an amazing trader. He returned to Japan about five years ago.”

“He could have come back temporarily.”

Munechika tried to debunk Shiiba’s theory: “He could have. But there would have been no reason for him to be involved in the rivalry between the Togetsu Group and the Koujin Association. His relationship with his uncle, the Togetsu Group president, fell apart when he was young.”

Shiiba eyed him suspiciously. “You know a lot. How do you know Godou?”

“I worked with Godou in Hong Kong for a time,” Munechika said straightforwardly.

Shiiba trembled. He didn’t like that Godou and Munechika knew each other more intimately than he had anticipated. “What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing. We just met by coincidence. He asked if I would help him at work, and I said I would. That’s all. We knew each other for about two years. I didn’t really like how he thought or the way he did things, so I took the money I had earned and came home. Your sister must have been murdered just after that.”

“Did Godou ever try to contact you when you came back to Japan?”

“No. I didn’t know if he was dead or alive. Then, a year ago, I bumped into him at the party held to announce that my brother was taking over the Matsukura Group. He was the president of the Godou Group, then.”

Even if they had worked together for a time, Shiiba could tell that Munechika really disliked Godou. That was a relief. If Munechika had some kind of secret relationship with the man who possibly had killed Yukari, then he didn’t think he would be able to bring himself to keep seeing Munechika.

Shiiba couldn’t sit still now. He launched himself off the sofa. Turning around, he looked down at Munechika, his lips pursed. “Munechika, I need the truth. I need to know if the person who killed my sister was Godou or not.” Shiiba stated this with so much force he could hear his pulse beating in his temples.

Munechika grabbed Shiiba’s arms and stared straight into his eyes. “You mustn’t go near him,” he whispered urgently.

“Why?”

“Godou is different from any other criminal you’ve known. He might look like a gentleman, but he will do anything to achieve his ambitions.” Munechika looked so serious, it spooked Shiiba a little.

But it made him angry too.

Surely if it was a question of power, the Matsukura Group was far stronger than the Godou Group. Financial wealth, members, friends, political connections—the Matsukura Group was superior in so many ways.

So why was Munechika so afraid? What kind of man was Godou? What made him so dangerous that even Munechika backed off?

“You mustn’t go near him. Please, promise me you won’t.” Munechika’s voice was quiet and controlled, but there was something desperate in his eyes.

Without any new leads on the bootlegged guns, the entire case was at a standstill. Investigation into Maruoka’s hit-and-run was so difficult, it proceeded slowly. There had been no revelations to help apprehend the criminal.

Shiiba remembered seeing the name “Tokujyuurou Yoshizawa” at Maruoka’s funeral. He also remembered seeing Yoshizawa’s name when he had been looking at records relating to another case more than two years ago. Shiiba was intrigued by that connection. He called the Intelligence Management Division’s Verification Center and asked for a criminal records background check.

Just as he suspected, Yoshizawa had prior convictions—for possession of firearms and the illegal manufacture of firearms. Shiiba couldn’t believe that this was pure coincidence. He asked Takasaki for help, and investigation materials were delivered to his place in Shibuya.

Yoshizawa was sixty-nine years old. He had been arrested twice in the past for criminal offences. Previously, he had worked at a gun manufacturing plant. There, he had learned the skills necessary to make firearms. He had been

caught doing it illegally and served two jail sentences of three and then five years.

Shiiba could sympathize a little, considering the background. The man had been asked to perform maintenance work on some guns by Yakuza who hadn't left him any choice on the matter. The Yakuza had also used his knowledge, forcing him to start manufacturing guns. It had been a plan from the beginning to press Yoshizawa into their service. They threatened his family if he refused to do as they asked. Yoshizawa really had no choice.

He had been compensated well for it, though. He proved to be an excellent craftsman and Yakuza everywhere considered his guns to be some of the best. The guns started selling for high prices and soon were in just as much demand as regular-branded guns.

After attaining permission from Takasaki, Shiiba began surveillance work on Yoshizawa.

Yoshizawa was now operating Yoshizawa Iron Works near Kitajyukken River. He was living with his granddaughter in a house adjacent to the factory. The iron works manufactured machine parts. It was run jointly by Yoshizawa and his nineteen-year-old granddaughter, Kiri Yoshizawa. There were two other employees. It was a very small-scale operation. The records indicated that the factory had previous dealings with Asahi Construction, which had been Maruoka's enterprise.

The company stayed open until six o'clock in the evening. The latest the employees would leave was eight o'clock. However, the lights were on until very late at night. The sound of active machines could be heard until two in the morning. The noise confirmed that someone was working in the building until that hour.

The replica CRS pistol was mostly assembled by hand, using very simple machinery. It could be done with a drill machine, which meant that most of the small back-street factories in Japan possessed the necessary equipment to make one.

In the past, the gangs had imported skilled Filipino workers to come to Japan

to make handguns. Gangs would also place orders for gun parts with different back-street factories and then assemble those. Some gangs had been doing this on a massive scale for years.

Yoshizawa Iron Works would have all the materials and machinery necessary. And Shiiba knew that Yoshizawa had the knowledge and experience. Putting two and two together, it was highly likely that handguns were being manufactured here.

Every day, Shiiba headed to the Yoshizawa Iron Works, wondering how he was going to get the concrete proof that he needed. He realized his limitations immediately. The factory was too small for him to sneak in unnoticed. He spent several days lurking around the outer compound fence, frustrated. Even if he did do something as drastic as breaking in, it wasn't going to help the investigation. He decided that he would need some more help.

With the intention of wrapping up his spy work that day, he headed to Yoshizawa Iron Works. When he got near the factory, he discovered an old man crouching in the street. Shiiba started to approach the old man, thinking that something might be wrong. When he realized that the old man was Yoshizawa, he stopped in his tracks.

Detectives weren't supposed to meet the target of their surveillance face to face. If the detective was recognized, then his cover was blown for good. However, Shiiba figured if he was going to wrap the whole case up today, then this could be the very chance he needed.

Shiiba quickly made his mind up—he was going to talk to the old man.

“Is anything wrong? Are you all right?” Shiiba approached Yoshizawa with a concerned look on his face.

Yoshizawa had his hand to his chest. He nodded a little. His face was wrinkled with worry and he was clearly in pain.

“If you're not well, I could call an ambulance.” Shiiba was starting to become genuinely concerned.

“No, I'm fine. This happens.” Yoshizawa tried to stand up, but he stumbled.

Shiiba quickly moved to support him. “Where do you live? I’ll take you there.”

“Thanks. If you could take me to Yoshizawa Iron Works. I live next to the factory.”

“I can see the sign.” Shiiba nodded in a friendly manner. Supporting Yoshizawa, he walked toward the factory.

Yoshizawa’s house was a simple one-story wooden building. Both the exterior and interior were old and run-down.

Shiiba carried Yoshizawa inside and laid him down on the futon. The tatami mats were old and thinning in places. This man certainly wasn’t living the high-life.

Yoshizawa took some medicine, and he seemed to relax a little. He kept thanking Shiiba. “Mister Shibano, was it? Thank you so much.”

“I didn’t do anything, really.”

Hearing Yoshizawa thank him so sincerely made Shiiba feel a little guilty, but he had to keep his mind on the job and stay in character. “Are you sure you shouldn’t see a doctor?”

“I have a bad heart. I have these attacks sometimes. I just need a bit of rest and some medicine.”

Considering that the symptoms would go away after taking some medicine, Shiiba surmised that the old man probably had angina. If he was having repeated attacks, he should probably go in for surgery.

“Do you have any family?” Shiiba asked trying to keep his mind on his original purpose.

“I live with my granddaughter.”

The old man and the girl lived in this ramshackle house together. Shiiba had known this before, but hearing it from Yoshizawa’s mouth made it more real, more tragic. He really pitied their situation.

“I’m glad you have someone to look after you...is she out right now?” Shiiba asked, keeping up the conversation.

“I think she’s in the factory. We don’t usually work on a Sunday, but she really likes the machines.”

He was still clearly in pain, but Yoshizawa’s smile betrayed a hint of true happiness. Who wouldn’t be happy that their granddaughter would so diligently help with the family business? Shiiba looked into the old man’s kind eyes. He took in the wizened, wrinkled face, and his heart went out to Yoshizawa.

Someone came in through the door.

“Kiri? Is that you?” Yoshizawa called from the futon.

The screen slid open and a girl entered the room. It was Kiri Yoshizawa.

She was petite. She wore a jumpsuit covered in oil and on her hands she wore thick, dirty work gloves. Her long hair cascaded down her back, but it wasn’t cut evenly. It looked as if she’d cut it herself. Her eyes were dark and narrow. Shiiba could tell she was a fairly strong-willed young lady.

She didn’t seem alarmed at the presence of an unfamiliar man in her house. She just looked at Shiiba with no hint of emotion on her face. Shiiba knew that she was nineteen, but she could have passed for a fifteen or sixteen-year-old.

“This is my granddaughter, Kiri...Kiri, I didn’t feel very well when I was walking down the street, and this kind man took pity on me and brought me back. Could you make him some tea?”

“You don’t have to.” Shiiba tried to stop her, but Yoshizawa shook his head.

“We don’t have any way of thanking you. But at least have some tea.”

Yoshizawa wasn’t well enough to move around yet, but he got off the futon and slowly walked into the living room, inviting Shiiba to join him.

They sat down at a small coffee table. Shiiba drank some of the tea that Kiri brought him.

Kiri nodded and then left them. She sat on the porch and petted a dog. It was an old mutt, but she clearly loved it.

“She’s not so good with people. Please don’t be offended,” Yoshizawa blurted out.

“Huh?” Shiiba said, a little surprised.

“Kiri, she can’t talk.”

That fact hadn’t been in any records Shiiba had seen. “Really? Has she always been that way?”

“Something very unfortunate happened ten years ago. It really broke her heart. One day, she just stopped speaking,” Yoshizawa said, sadly watching Kiri sit outside. Clearly, the old man regretted not hearing his granddaughter’s voice for the last ten years.

Shiiba could sympathize with Yoshizawa’s pain. “I shouldn’t interfere. But have you tried professional trauma counseling? I’ve heard it’s very effective in treating people who’ve lost their voices after traumatic incidents.”

It sounded psychosomatic, like emotional pain manifesting itself as a physical symptom. It wasn’t as if a physical injury had rendered her mute. There was hope she could speak again.

“I took her to the hospital once, but she didn’t want to be examined, so the doctor never saw her again. I decided just to accept it. She’s no good with people, but she’s very good with the lathe. She can’t speak and she didn’t go to school much, but she’s a great help in the factory. Works every day. She’s an excellent mechanic. And if you’ve got skill in this world, then you’ll get by somehow.”

Yoshizawa was probably thinking about what would happen to her when he passed on.

According to the files, Yoshizawa Iron Works had been operating for twenty years. Yoshizawa’s son, Hirokatsu, had taken over, but because of the recession, business hadn’t gone well. They’d had to borrow a lot of money to

pay for factory machinery, and with both the company and their home-life suffering, Hirokatsu and his wife, Mikako, had committed a double suicide. The insurance company refused to pay out, and with no one else to hand the business to, Yoshizawa resumed running it.

Suddenly, Shiiba realized that Kiri had disappeared. Thinking that he shouldn't stay too long, he stood up. He assured Yoshizawa that the old man should stay seated, but Yoshizawa insisted on seeing him out.

The factory door was open when Shiiba walked past, so he quickly glanced inside, trying to see anything at all. Kiri was standing in front of a quickly turning grinder. In her hand was a piece of metal that she was polishing. Sparks flew everywhere. A burning smell filled the air.

“She’s sharpening a cutting blade,” Yoshizawa explained.

“She uses a brazed blade?” Shiiba asked.

Yoshizawa looked a little surprised. “Mister Shibano, you know about lathes?”

“I went to a technical college, so I learned a little about them,” Shiiba quickly lied. “I’ve forgotten most of it now, though.”

Yoshizawa seemed satisfied by this answer. “Most places don’t use blades like this anymore. There are plenty of places that don’t even sharpen blades. Everything’s automated these days. To use the machines here takes real skill.”

In Yoshizawa’s eyes, Kiri wasn’t simply a beloved granddaughter, but also the person to whom he’d be able to pass on his legacy. He held a professional respect for the girl.

Shiiba was supposed to check for any signs that guns were being built in there. But he was enthralled by the look of pure concentration on Kiri’s face. Eventually, she noticed the two of them standing there, and she powered down the grinder.

“Mister Shibano is going home now.”

Kiri just nodded. No smile. She didn’t seem embarrassed, as most girls would

be, to be in such a dirty state in front of a young man. Her thin frame almost made her look like a boy...

“Look after your grandfather,” Shiiba said.

Kiri bowed slightly in reply.

As he left the factory, Shiiba couldn't get her out of his mind.

She'd lost her voice ten years ago. Shiiba guessed it was from the shock of her parents' suicide. The files had said they'd hanged themselves in their home. If Kiri had found them...it was too depressing.

If Shiiba was completely honest, meeting Yoshizawa in person had shaken his conviction a little. He couldn't believe that such a weak old man would make illegal guns.

Physically speaking, it was probably possible. However, he had served two jail sentences in the past, why would he repeat the same crime? Also, having to make them in secret would be pretty stressful. Shiiba felt that manufacturing bootlegged guns would be too much for Yoshikawa's already weakened body.

Had he been wrong? Overeager? Had he jumped to wrong conclusions?

Shiiba had thought he'd been so close to solving the mystery, but the answer had escaped him again. He was lost once more.

Shiiba looked up into the dusky red sky. He still didn't have any answers.

Chapter 6

Whoever was tailing Shiiba had disappeared. Maybe they had decided it wasn't possible to follow him. Or they hadn't been able to gather evidence of any wrongdoing and given up. Shiiba didn't know, but he was very relieved to have the stress and inconvenience of being followed gone.

He got home early that day. As soon as he walked in through the door, he got a phone call from Kuro. Shiiba hadn't heard from the brat for some time.

“Can I meet you? I found out more about Tomo,” Kuro whined.

Shiiba suspected that this was another wild goose chase, so he pushed for more information before committing himself to a meeting. “Really?”

“Really. I'm not going to lie. This time I mean it. I don't want you to hate me.”

Kuro did indeed sound more serious than usual. Shiiba thought that he could give the boy one more chance. “What's Tomo's real name?”

“Don't always be in such a hurry. I'll tell you when we meet. Do you remember the promise you made me?”

Unfortunately, Shiiba did remember his promise to get a piercing in exchange for solid intelligence.

“I don't mind where you get it—your navel, or your nipple.” Kuro giggled on the other side of the phone. “I knew I could rely on you, Mister Shibano. I can't wait.”

They decided to meet in Shibuya again, but at a different bar this time. Shiiba left the house and headed straight there.

If he could identify Tomo and confirm his involvement, then he would be able to move the case forward. If Tomo mentioned Maruoka by name, then the police would have enough probable cause to search Maruoka's home. Shiiba was sure that they would find concrete evidence there.

The place that Kuro suggested was another run-down dive. The bar's old electric sign read "Amour."

Shiiba eagerly opened the door and immediately saw Kuro sitting at the bar. The young man looked bored, puffing away on his cigarette.

There were no other customers, just the bartender. The place's outward appearance wasn't deceiving. It really was an unpopular dive.

"Hi, Mister Shibano!" Kuro waved like an excited child.

Shiiba sat down next to the boy and sighed when the kid ordered him a whiskey and water without bothering to ask Shiiba what he wanted to drink.

"Let's toast to seeing each other again," Kuro said enthusiastically.

Shiiba wasn't in a position to refuse, not if he wanted to get the information he needed. He raised his glass to Kuro.

"Hey, if you drink three in a row, then I'll tell you everything I know." Kuro flashed Shiiba a huge smile and then downed his drink.

Shiiba followed suit. The alcohol wasn't too strong, but it certainly wasn't weak.

Kuro whistled. "You're a good drinker. When you get your piercing, though, you best be sober. If you're drunk, you bleed more. But I bet you wouldn't mind that, would you?" he asked, sporting a sick grin.

"Of course I would! You can faint if you lose too much blood," Shiiba answered in all seriousness.

Kuro sighed. "Always the same." Then, he cackled as if he'd just heard the

funniest joke in the world.

Shiiba wanted to get down to business while Kuro was still in a good mood. “So, come on, tell me.”

“Well, okay...oh! Give me two seconds! My phone is ringing”

Shiiba cursed the poor timing of the call and took out his packet of cigarettes, frustrated.

“Hello? Yep, it’s me...huh? What? No! Now? Shibuya...yeah, sure.”

The conversation dragged on and on. Shiiba took a puff on his cigarette. He was starting to feel light-headed—probably because he drank on an empty stomach. He felt drunk, and the feeling only got worse. His skull felt like someone was drilling spikes into it. He found it difficult to stay seated.

“Just wait a little. I’ll bring you a present. You’ll definitely like it. It’s really hard to get hold of...” Kuro’s voice sounded further and further away.

Shiiba’s head lolled to the side and he collapsed onto the bar’s counter.

“Oh, Mister Shibano, is something wrong? Are you drunk? Hey! Bartender! How much alcohol was in this?” Kuro put his hand on Shiiba’s shoulder and looked at him. The young man seemed concerned about Shiiba, but something in his tone rang false. “Hey, are you okay? Wanna puke? Let’s go to the restroom.”

Instinctively, Shiiba knew something was wrong. He tried to dislodge Kuro’s hand, but he lost balance and fell off his stool.

“Hey. You can’t faint until I pierce you. You still haven’t shed a drop of blood and you’re already fainting—that’s no good.”

Shiiba looked up from where he was sprawled on the floor, struggling to stay conscious. Kuro was grinning down at him.

“What...did you put...in the drink?”

“Oh, I should have told you. I added some sleeping medicine. You don’t mind, do you? You look like you don’t get enough rest. But you can’t sleep on the

floor.” Kuro let out a howl of laughter. He pressed his boot against Shiiba’s cheek.

Through the haze of the drug, Shiiba felt pain as his face was ground into the floor. Despite the pain, he couldn’t stop himself from drifting off...

A tune disturbed Shiiba’s slumber. It was a quiet and beautiful song with a bittersweet melody. He knew the tune well, but he couldn’t recall the title.

It was the theme song from an old movie with an actress that Yukari had really liked.

“I love Moon River. Very relaxing,” someone said.

That was the song title that had been on the tip of Shiiba’s tongue—Moon River.

“How are you feeling? Tell me how you’re feeling, Shiiba.”

Shiiba knew that voice. He kept his eyes closed and checked himself for injuries. He wasn’t in pain and he wasn’t being restrained in any way.

“Not bad. I feel awake.” Shiiba slowly opened his eyes to see Godou.

That wasn’t a total surprise. Shiiba had formed some idea of what was happening.

He was alone in the room with Godou. He had been sleeping on a corner sofa. Godou was sitting at a table opposite the couch.

Shiiba sat up, keeping an eye on Godou. ““We’re after the same rainbow’s end,”” he quoted.

“That’s great.” Godou laughed. His laugh was infectious, and Shiiba almost found himself smiling.

Shiiba took a look around. The room was spacious and elaborately furnished. It looked like a suite in a five-star hotel. Godou wasn’t wearing a suit this time.

He was dressed in beige chinos and a shiny black shirt.

“That kid that brought me here. He’s Munechika’s brother?” Shiiba asked.

“Motoaki. You’re good.”

Shiiba had figured he would have to trick Godou into telling the truth, but the man was surprisingly forthcoming. Now the conversation Munechika had with Godou at the funeral made sense.

“The Matsukura Group’s president likes playing around,” Godou continued. “No matter how much people warn him, he won’t stop. But I suppose there’s a lot of stress on him, taking so a high position at such a young age. He has no real outlet.”

So, “Kuro” was Motoaki’s other personality. A way to escape himself. To become someone else.

“Didn’t he tell you that he was a fan of Claude Rains?” Godou asked.

Claude Rains was famous for playing The Invisible Man. Perhaps that was what Kuro was trying to do: slip into the darkness and become invisible to everyone. Perhaps he didn’t want to be special anymore.

“You’re being pretty calm about all this.” Godou looked intrigued.

“Oh, I think I’m going to crap myself. I wanna call the police,” Shiiba replied sarcastically.

He knew he was in a very dangerous position, but for some reason, he didn’t feel scared. Maybe because Godou wasn’t scary at the moment. He was a mysterious man. Shiiba couldn’t begin to guess what the man would do next, but he wasn’t scary right now. He was enigmatic.

Moreover, now that he was finally face to face with the man who may have killed Yukari, Shiiba didn’t have to try to calm himself. His cool-headedness wasn’t the result of reason or courage, but the burning rage that had been trapped inside his heart for so long. His anger consumed all other emotion.

“The police won’t help you. You should call someone else.” Godou took out

his cell phone and dialed a number. “It’s me. Hey, don’t hang up. I want to tell you something. Motoaki has been playing with your toy. He brought it here...no, not yet. Anyway, I thought I should let its owner know.”

Shiiba knew Godou had called Munechika. He bit down on his lip and listened to Godou talk.

“If you’re worried, you’ll have to come and collect him. I’m at my place in Ebisu.” With that, Godou hung up.

“What’s going on? What do you have to do with any of this? Where’s Motoaki?”

“I told Motoaki to drug you and bring you here. You don’t think that idiot could make a decision like that on his own, do you?” Godou sighed.

Shiiba hesitated. “What?”

“It’s not that difficult. Munechika was acting strange, so I had him investigated. It took three months to find out everything about you. Your brother-in-law is a detective, but I made sure he was left alone. I don’t want to mess with the cops. What was his name? Hideyuki Shinozuka, was it?”

Shiiba’s whole body tensed up.

Godou smiled again, enjoying Shiiba’s reaction. “Interestingly enough, last year, he was on all the official records. But this year, his name didn’t come up on the official staff listing. An elite officer suddenly vanishes? It’s obvious—he’s doing something secret at Chiyoda.”

Shiiba didn’t confirm or deny this. He just kept staring at Godou. What Godou was talking about was so taboo that even Shiiba wouldn’t question Shinozuka about it.

After the war, there had been rumors of a secret organization that gave orders to Public Security. The people involved referred to the organization with the codename Chiyoda. Only the best of the best could work there. It was said that Central Planning had two leaders, but only one name was written on official records. The other name belonged to the Chiyoda leader.

Shiiba had heard from Inose that Godou was involved with the far-left. It wasn't that strange, therefore, that he should know about the inner workings of Public Security. But was it just that? Or was he hiding something else?

It was safe to assume that Godou had known about Shinozuka for a long time—as the husband of the woman he killed eight years ago. Shiiba wanted to tell Godou that he knew all about his past crimes, but he decided not to speak. He wanted to ask questions. He wanted to discover the truth. However, considering the circumstances, he had to be careful and disguise his intentions.

Godou explained, “I didn't want to rush this with someone like Shinozuka in the background, so I ordered Motoaki to wait. But sometimes he just won't follow orders. I found out by accident that he'd befriended you. I didn't think he would actually go as far as kidnapping you. He has real problems.”

Clearly, Godou hadn't intended for things to go the way they had that evening. There was no hint of panic or insecurity in Godou's manner, though. Rather, he seemed interested by the unpredictable nature of the situation.

Suddenly, the door was flung open. “Oh, is he awake?” Kuro—or, more accurately, Motoaki Matsukura—asked. Men dressed in black stood behind him. “I need a minute with him. Shibano—oh sorry, I meant Shiiba. You have to keep your promise.” The young man's normally cheerful voice now sounded sinister. A stud was clutched in Motoaki's hand. “I can do it for you.” Motoaki nodded, and his men pinned Shiiba down.

Godou watched the proceedings from the sofa.

Shiiba struggled.

This seemed to amuse Motoaki. He licked his lips with his own pierced tongue. “Which nipple? Right? Or left?”

He ripped open Shiiba's shirt. The buttons went flying. Motoaki ran his finger down the detective's exposed chest.

“What are you—?” Shiiba began.

“You said that you'd get a piercing. Oh yes, you wanted the information first.

I'm Tomo. I was the guy with the gun at the party. But it was just a model gun.” Motoaki laughed then rubbed his face against Shiiba’s chest. He started nibbling on Shiiba’s right nipple.

Shiiba yelped.

“That’s what you wanted to know, wasn’t it?” Motoaki grinned. Without preamble, he pushed a thick metal needle into Shiiba’s nipple.

Shiiba screamed.

The needle was wide, but Motoaki pushed it in with such force that it instantly penetrated Shiiba’s flesh.

Shiiba writhed in pain, but the men kept a strong grip on him.

“You can’t faint. That would be boring.”

Shiiba felt like he really would pass out. He looked down to see Motoaki tease the hole in his nipple with the wide needle.

“I have a really nice nipple stud. It’s going to suit you...what do you think, Godou? Can I give it to him?”

Motoaki showed Godou a slightly transparent stud of a butterfly.

Godou nodded. “Do whatever you want.”

Shiiba’s nipple was bleeding. Motoaki didn’t care, though. He pushed the stud into the fresh wound. Shiiba yelped again as the cold, thick metal slid inside.

Motoaki screwed the ball onto the stud, and then he held up what looked like a tube of superglue. “I want to make sure you don’t take it out,” he said, squeezing a little of the glue onto the ball and stud. “What a funny sight—a detective with a nipple piercing. Can I take a photo? Send it to your friends at the station? Hmm?”

Waves of pain washed over Shiiba as Motoaki pushed down on the butterfly stud. Shiiba bit down on his lip to stop himself from crying out anymore than he already had.

“We could give you a piercing down there too. Then when you’re hard, sex will feel even better. It’ll hurt so much, you’ll cry.” Motoaki laughed hysterically.

Godou said, “That’s enough.”



Motoaki ignored Godou and continued to laugh. “I’m not done yet. He has to come to my party. It’ll be even more fun. Come on, get him up.”

One of Motoaki's men came forward and held out a plastic case, which Motoaki took and opened. Shiiba knew what was in there. Reacting quickly, he head-butted the man to his right. The man grunted.

Shiiba intended to run while the guards were distracted. However, with Motoaki's help, the guards grabbed Shiiba and pushed him down on the sofa.

"What are you doing?! Keep him down!" Motoaki cried.

"Sorry, sir." The guard Shiiba had hurt shook his head. He took Motoaki's place, holding Shiiba down.

Motoaki wasn't flustered by Shiiba's attempt at escape. He just took a needle out of the case and said, "Just relax. You need to be calm for this..."

One of the men pulled up Shiiba's sleeve.

"Get off me!" Shiiba growled.

"You don't mind getting a piercing, but you're scared of needles? You're a strange man. This won't hurt half as much," Motoaki said before sucking on Shiiba's freshly pierced nipple.

No matter how much Shiiba struggled, he couldn't work his way free.

Motoaki grabbed Shiiba's arm and injected the unknown liquid into Shiiba's veins.

"We don't want him hurting himself. Tie him up."

The men took off their neckties and used them to tie Shiiba's arms and legs together.

Godou frowned. "This is tacky. What did you give him?"

"Angel Dust. It takes effect almost immediately." Motoaki was really enjoying himself. He stroked Shiiba's cheek, gazing at his captive with hungry eyes.

Angel Dust was PCP, a hallucinogenic drug similar to LSD. It was famous for giving much more intense trips than other drugs.

"You're really messed up," Godou said.

Motoaki shrugged. “Why? It could send him to paradise if we get the dose right.”

“Or hell, if something goes wrong,” said Godou.

“What are you worried about? You’re going to kill him anyway. You can’t let him live now no matter what happens,” Motoaki argued.

“Not yet, though,” Godou replied.

“Why not?” Motoaki didn’t look happy. In fact, he seemed jumpy and excitable compared to Godou’s cool and deliberate calm.

“Motoaki, I told you,” Godou reminded. “You won’t hurt him unless I say so. Or did you forget?”

“I remember. But he’s just a detective. Leave him to me. I’ll get rid of the evidence.”

“Just shut up.” Godou looked away, disgusted. “Your brother will be here in a minute. He’s going to be mad when he sees what you did to his toy.”

Motoaki immediately flew into a rage and kicked over the table. “Why the hell did you go and do that for?!” he screamed, grabbing Godou’s collar. “Why did you call Keigo?!”

Godou spoke to Motoaki in a gentle voice, as if he were talking to a child: “What are you mad about? You can see your beloved brother. He hasn’t been around much recently. You’ve been lonely, haven’t you? He’s been such a bad boy, abandoning his adorable little brother for a detective. I’ll help you show him what he’s done.”

“Shut up. Don’t get involved with Keigo. I won’t allow it.”

“Oh? You won’t allow it?” Godou gently took Motoaki’s hand. “You don’t have to pretend with me. We both know you can’t do anything without me.”

“I’m the president of the Matsukura Group! I’m not some rich dumb Yakuza. Don’t make fun of me—”

Suddenly, Godou grabbed Motoaki’s arm and twisted it behind his back.

“Ow! Godou!” Motoaki protested.

“Motoaki, you’re like my son. You do such stupid things, but I still love you. You can’t forget your place, though.” As he spoke, he twisted Motoaki’s arm further behind the boy’s back.

“Ow, stop! You’ll break it...Godou! Let go of me!”

One of Motoaki’s men tried to get involved. “Godou!”

“Keep out of it!” Godou barked.

The man backed off.

“What are you going to do, Motoaki?” Godou needled. “Get your men to help? You can try, if you want.”

“I won’t. I won’t!” Motoaki glanced up at his employee. “Don’t interfere!”

He had gone pale and was crying in pain, but Godou didn’t ease up.

“It hurts! It hurts! You’ll break my arm...”

“Shall I?” Godou whispered in Motoaki’s ear. “Maybe it’ll teach you a lesson about growing up. I’ll break both your arms and legs. Don’t worry. You can lie on the bed like a rag doll. I’ll look after you—feed and bathe you. See to your ... other needs. That would be fun, wouldn’t it?”

Shiiba could just barely make out what the man was saying.

Motoaki shivered, genuinely believing Godou’s threat.

“Why are you crying?” Godou continued. “You don’t like me? Then, you can go. I don’t want you to stay with me if you don’t like it.”

“No... no, I don’t want to go! I’m sorry! Forgive me! Forgive me!” Motoaki pleaded. He looked like a kid begging his parents not to smack him. It was pitiful.

“All right then.” Godou released Motoaki, but the young man didn’t move. He just rubbed his arm and cried. Godou pulled him close, took out a tissue, and gently wiped the tears and snot from his face. “I’m the only one who

understands you. You know that, Motoaki,” Godou soothed.

Godou transformed into a totally different person from the one who had almost broken Motoaki’s arm. Shiiba was shocked to see such a devil turn into an angel so quickly.

Godou hugged Motoaki and continued to whisper into his ear. “You were alone for so long. It hurt so much. No one understood you. They didn’t know anything about you. Everyone hurt you. But I understand you. I know how you’re feeling. So stay with me. I’m on your side.”

Motoaki collapsed into Godou’s arms and sobbed quietly.

“Let’s clean you up, my handsome boy.”

Motoaki nodded. He wiped himself off and stood up. With his shoulders slumped over, he shuffled out of the room. His two bodyguards followed. Shiiba almost felt sorry for him. Motoaki was too young to play the hand he’d been dealt with. Godou had broken him down and then provided the support he so desperately craved.

“Got him eating out of your hand?” Shiiba taunted. His bound hands and feet were going numb.

Godou twitched. “Is that how it looks to you?”

“Isn’t that how it is?” Shiiba replied. His mouth was dry. It was difficult to think properly. Perhaps the drugs were kicking in. “You beat him down and then pull him back up.”

“Your assessment is too simplistic,” Godou retorted. “That boy has a lot of problems. It takes real skill to control someone like him. People like that either react aggressively, or they fear others and so harm themselves. That boy tries to convince himself that he’s superior by attacking others. But deep down inside, he really wants to be looked after. No one looks out for him. No one tells him when he’s wrong. Everyone just tries to avoid his wrath. But I look after him. I know how to give him what he wants.”



“Don’t give me that bull. You’re controlling Motoaki to help yourself.”

“It’s only what he wants. Anyway, you have no business talking to me like

that. What about you and Munechika? Are you telling me that that relationship is healthy?”

Godou sat down next to Shiiba.

“Munechika isn’t the sort of man to take orders, especially from a detective. What are you giving him in exchange for his obedience? Your body?”

He stroked Shiiba’s fresh piercing with the tip of his fingers. His touch was light, but it sent little waves of pain coursing through Shiiba’s body. The slightest touch paralyzed him.

“If you can control a man like that with sex, then you’re some detective. If you were a woman, I would steal you away from Munechika.” Godou bent over, leering at Shiiba, who couldn’t move away.

They were so close—almost touching. Shiiba could feel Godou’s breath on his skin. It was so intimate. Shiiba was more embarrassed by the proximity than if Godou had just kissed him.

He glared into Godou’s pale brown eyes, wanting to bite the man’s nose off.

“Such pretty eyes,” Godou crooned. “They really sparkle. You’re starting to turn me on. You look like a wild beast. Why did you become a detective? You really chose the wrong path.”

“What do you know about it?” Shiiba mumbled, unable to move his mouth properly. He dug his nails into his hand to keep himself from falling asleep, but it didn’t work. He started to drift off.

“You don’t have the eyes of a detective. You have the eyes of a criminal. You hold so much anger in that black heart of yours. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Godou’s voice echoed in Shiiba’s head. It wasn’t the drug. It was as if Godou had uttered a magic spell.

Something caught Shiiba’s eye. On the wall hung a square box made for keeping samples of insects. Inside Shiiba could see the beautiful colors of butterfly wings.

“What is it?” Godou followed Shiiba’s gaze. “Oh. That. Those are my butterflies. Beautiful, aren’t they? I arranged them myself.”

“The wings...”

The butterflies inside the box looked fantastic; Shiiba couldn’t take his eyes off them. They were displayed so elegantly, but, he noticed, each and every butterfly had only one wing.

“They only have one wing, yes. Is that strange? I think they look most beautiful that way,” Godou said, lifting Shiiba up. His voice was thick with love for his creations. “Have you ever pulled a wing off a butterfly? They struggle so much and try to fly away. But with only one wing, they just fall back down. Just like little leaves fluttering to the ground.”

“You’re sick.”

Shiiba rested his head on the sofa. He was feeling light-headed and it was too hard to speak. Everything was starting to sway. The world was spinning.

Godou murmured: “Everything is wrong. Everything is different. What you’re seeing now is so enjoyable. Everything is unstable and strange.”

The one-winged butterflies flew in front of Shiiba’s eyes. They were terrible, enormous. All of them had only one wing.

Shiiba shook his head. The butterflies were trying to suffocate him.

He knew it was an illusion, but they scared him. As the butterflies fell, covering his face, Shiiba found it increasingly difficult to breathe.

Moon River permeated his consciousness. The song was sometimes loud, sometimes quiet. Everything was bathed in a bright light. His vision pulsed with the rhythm of the music. The butterflies danced in time, surrounding him in a kaleidoscope of colors.

“The music—turn it off.”

“Why? It’s a good song. Maybe you’ll find the rainbow’s end.” Godou whispered a few lyrics into Shiiba’s ear, his voice morphing into Yukari’s.

"Hey. Stop playing that song."

Yukari was cooking dinner in the kitchen, singing to herself.

"But it's a good song. I love the scene in 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' where Audrey Hepburn sings this."

Shiiba treasured the memory of watching that movie with his sister.

Suddenly, all the hair on Shiiba's body stood on end. There was something wrong with this scene.

Yukari smiled, but her pale face was locked inside the specimen cabinet. Her hands and feet were pinned down by needles.

Shiiba screamed and beat his hands on the glass. The box shattered, dispersing hundreds of transparent shards of glass that ripped Shiiba's skin.

Covered in blood, he reached out to Yukari.

"Masaki, help me." Bloody tears streamed down Yukari's face, staining her cheeks.

"I'm going to help you."

Shiiba started yanking the pins out of her flesh. Each time he did so, huge amounts of blood spurted from her wounds.

"That's enough, Masaki. That's enough." Yukari writhed in pain. Something crawled out from between her lips...

It was a one-winged butterfly.

Then hundreds of them crawled out of her mouth and launched themselves at Shiiba. He tried to knock them away and touch Yukari.

"Sister..."

Shiiba started sobbing. Yukari was dead. In that moment, Shiiba had to relive years of pain. He knew none of it was real, but he couldn't help himself.

Someone touched his cheek, wiping a tear away.

"A sad dream. How horrible."

Shiiba recognized Godou's voice as he came out of his trance. Godou's touch was gentle. Shiiba needed that. He knew it was a false kindness, but it didn't matter.

"Cry as much as you want. Munechika is coming. I'll leave you until then."

Shiiba sensed Godou leaving the room.

Once he was alone, he tried to pull himself together, telling himself that the memories and emotions he was experiencing were only a result of the drugs. However much he fought the drug, though, the hallucinations wouldn't stop. Colors and sounds and monsters danced in front of him. He lost track of time. He lost his sense of self. He was consumed by the hallucinations. In his mind days passed. He wished someone would save him. He wanted to scream, but he could only groan.

Amid the chaos, he heard what sounded like a girl's voice. "It's all right. It's all right now. It's just a bad dream. You'll wake up soon. It's going to be okay." A soft hand stroked Shiiba's cheek.

"Sister..."

Shiiba knew Yukari was just an illusion, but the touch of her soft skin calmed him.

"It's okay," she repeated over and over.

Chapter 7

“Shiiba! Shiiba, wake up!”

Shiiba stirred at the sound of the familiar voice. He forced his eyes to open. At first, he thought he was still tripping, but what he saw was all too real.

Munechika cradled him where he lay fallen on the floor.

“Munechika?”

“Are you alright?” Munechika asked him.

All Shiiba could do was nod. He was awake, but he still couldn’t think straight.

Munechika called to Kaname for help. His assistant released Shiiba from the neckties that bound his hands and feet.

Munechika turned to face Godou, his eyes filled with quiet rage. “What have you given him? What’s going on here?” he demanded to know.

Godou pushed the fringe of his bangs away from his eyes. “It’s PCP. Motoaki is the one responsible, not me.”

Munechika’s face contorted into an even more grim expression. “Where is he?”

“He left already. I’m sure he wasn’t too keen on running into you,” Godou answered arrogantly.

“Sir!” Kaname called Munechika over.

He opened Shiiba's shirt, revealing the detective's blood-splattered chest.

Munechika bristled at the sight, unable to keep cool. "Bastard!"

"Motoaki's work," Godou coolly said. "I don't know what you're getting so angry about. It's just a piercing. Even the drugs aren't enough to give him more than a little trip. This is nothing compared to the things you've done to Motoaki."

"Shut up. What do you know about me and Motoaki? I'm taking Shiiba back with me." Munechika swept Shiiba up in his arms and made for the door.

"Not so fast. Motoaki may be the one who brought Shiiba here, but you're still on my turf. You're not taking him anywhere without my permission...Kaiya!"

Godou called to one of the lackeys who stood behind him. A hulking, bull-necked giant—by far, the largest of the three goons—stepped in front of Munechika.

Before either man could move a muscle, Kaname got between them.

"Stand back, sir." Kaname faced down the thug, who must have decided that the smaller man was going to be easy pickings, because he grinned as he extended his trunk-like arm.

In a flash, Kaname deflected the heavy limb and retaliated with a series of sharp thrusts to Kaiya's gut. Each attack hit its target, but the force of the blows didn't seem to do much damage. They did slow the lackey down, however. Kaname was able to punch Kaiya's face several times.

Enraged, Kaiya advanced on Kaname and tried to overcome him with sheer force, but Kaname was too fast and continued to strike major blows. Finally, Kaname grabbed the flailing brute from behind and held a blade to his throat.

Kaiya gurgled in pain, no longer able to move.

Kaname let out a kung-fu battle cry as he sliced his foot through the air and brought it down directly onto Kaiya's face.

The large man fell to the floor, spent.

“Who’s next?” Kaname asked without even pausing for breath, eyeing the remaining two men.

“Enough,” interrupted Godou. “You useless jerks are hopelessly outclassed. Get Kaiya out of my sight.”

The men hastily carried Kaiya’s unconscious body out of the room.

“Such quick movements! Your skill never fails to impress me, Kaname. You make inflicting pain an art form.” Godou spoke theatrically. “I’d pay any price to have you practice that art in my name...but I don’t imagine your loyalty is for sale?”

“I serve only one man,” Kaname said evenly.

Godou couldn’t help but smirk at the sincerity of Kaname’s reply. “Still the same as ever, aren’t you? Boring.”

“If you’re quite finished, we’ll be leaving now,” said Munechika, carrying Shiiba as he walked to the exit. Kaname hurried to open the door.

“Not yet,” Godou said. “That detective...you two are screwing, aren’t you?”

Munechika didn’t bat an eyelash.

“What’s it to you?”

“What’s it to me? I’d say it’s quite a scandal. The Matsukura Group’s leader can’t have his big brother leaking information about guns to a detective.”

“Just what are you trying to say?” Munechika spat out, facing Godou.

“If it gets out that there’s a traitor among the higher ups, there will be dissent in the ranks. Motoaki’s influence and the power of the whole Matsukura Group will be greatly diminished,” Godou continued, searching Munechika’s face for a reaction. “There won’t be any choice but to punish you for your actions.”

“You can tell whoever you want about Shiiba and I,” replied Munechika with unwavering resolve. “I have no loyalty to the group or anyone in the Yakuza world, and I’ll gladly face any punishment you dish out.”

Godou looked despondent. “You’ve changed, Munechika. You’ve lost your edge. No matter. You may, as you say, have no concern for your own well-being, but can you say the same for that detective you’re holding?”

“You shouldn’t even have to ask.”

“In that case, you’ll do exactly what I say. Otherwise, I’ll keep going after him. I’ll take your precious detective and mold him as I see fit for my collection. You know me well enough to realize that I’ll do whatever it takes to make good on a threat.”

Munechika glared furiously at Godou, who stared right back at him.

The older man smiled as he told Munechika the price of Shiiba’s freedom: “Fuck him.”

“What?!”

Shocked, Munechika almost dropped Shiiba.

Godou continued: “Fuck him like you always do. Here. Now. In front of me. If you can, I’ll leave him alone. You see, I was actually planning to kill him, but now that I’ve met him, I’ve come to like him. So much so that I thought of making him mine. I don’t think you’ll be too happy either way, will you, Munechika? Whether I end his life or steal him from you, can you live with it?”

Godou drummed his fingers on his folded arms. “So fuck him now. Show me how much he means to you, and I’ll let you have him—as a favor, for old times’ sake.”

“I don’t trust you,” Munechika said, trying to figure out a way to resist Godou’s insane demand.

“I swear to you that I’ll keep up my end of the bargain. I swear by the secret I told only you all those years ago.”

The two men locked gazes. The silence seemed to last forever, but eventually, Munechika looked away. “Fine. I’ll do as you say. But I swear you better keep your promise and not try to take him from me.”

“Understood. Of course, if Shiiba should willingly run into my arms, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Munechika hissed. “I’m not going to let that happen.”

“Boss?” Kaname moved closer to Munechika, concerned.

“Don’t worry, Kaname. You just wait here. So, Godou, where’s the bedroom?”

“No, Munechika, please...” Shiiba begged, squinting against the bedroom’s soft light. He was still feeling the effects of the drugs, but he had heard the whole conversation. He couldn’t bear the shame of being screwed in front of Godou.

Munechika lay Shiiba down on the bed and started to take off his suit. “Don’t think about anything. Just look at me.” He quietly implored: “And don’t cry.”

Godou had sat down on the bed and looked into Shiiba’s eyes when he said, “A Yakuza and a detective. Just like Romeo and Juliet. What a wonderful sight it will be to see their tragic love consummated.”

Shiiba detested him. He was a low-life who pretended to have nobility and compassion.

“Munechika, I want a real show. Don’t just go through the motions. If I don’t think you mean it, the deal’s off.”

Munechika glared at Godou and removed Shiiba’s clothes with quick, practiced movements. “Shut up. You just sit there and watch.”

Soon, Shiiba was stark naked.

Munechika lay down on top of him. Shiiba had no strength to move or push back as Munechika planted warm kisses across his chest. His lover delicately kissed his nipple and licked the fresh blood clean.

“Munechika, please, not like this...”

Shiiba pleaded in despair. He hadn't wanted anyone to see him this vulnerable—only Munechika. But now, he was exposed and forced to perform in front of Godou. He was going to be abused in front of the man who may have killed Yukari.

Shiiba kept begging, but Munechika ignored him. His lover massaged Shiiba's body with the same care he always did, but it felt like a punishment now. Despite that, Shiiba could feel himself becoming aroused.

"No. No..." Shiiba tossed his head back and forth, pleading incoherently. He knew that Munechika was doing this to save him, but he still couldn't forgive the man. He hated that Munechika would do this to him in front of Godou.

"Shiiba, don't fight. Close your eyes and let me finish this. Pretend that I'm the only one here," Munechika whispered in Shiiba's ear.

Shiiba didn't want to feel pleasure; he tried to suppress it. Although he knew he had to listen to Munechika's advice, he had to struggle to open his legs. He was too ashamed to let himself go.

"You have to relax. Just like we always do. You need to let me in," Munechika muttered.

"Ah!"

Shiiba could feel Munechika working his way deep up inside of him. Munechika then started pulling out and pushing back in, thrusting carefully. Shiiba couldn't deny he was aroused now.

"You look like you're having fun," Godou taunted, breaking the illusion that Shiiba and Munechika were alone.

Shiiba looked into Godou's eyes.

"It looks like pleasure and pain, all rolled into one. Sometimes, the most cruel pain can be the sweetest pleasure. It's funny, though. Everyone makes the same expression at times like these—both the weakest woman and the strongest man. It's so attractive," Godou mocked, looking like he regretted not being part of the action. "You can cry out, you know. Feels good, right?"

Munechika filling you up...must feel amazing. Let yourself enjoy it as you would normally. I want to see. This is an amazing show for me. A simpering detective being fucked by a Yakuza. Not something you see every day.”

Godou stroked a finger down Shiiba’s sweaty forehead.

“Don’t touch him!” Munechika growled.

Smiling, Godou quickly removed his hand. He didn’t look away from Shiiba for a single second, though.

Shiiba could feel Godou’s eyes on him as he rocked back and forth in time with Munechika’s thrusts. He began to forget that he was with Munechika. He started imagining that it was Godou inside him. Shiiba felt so shamed. He was so embarrassed he wanted to die. Tears started to form in his eyes.

Godou wasn’t a simple spectator. He didn’t do anything, but by watching something that should have been private, he had put himself in a superior position. It was as if he owned them.

A man was most vulnerable during sex. Godou had used that to assert himself as the alpha-male among them.

“Be brave,” Munechika whispered in Shiiba’s ear. His lover’s movements became faster, harder. Shiiba started to reach his climax.

He didn’t want to come in front of Godou. Not in front of this man. Shiiba willed himself not to, but his body wasn’t listening. He was so close...

Shiiba despised his body; it betrayed him. He hated that he was too weak to control himself. He hated himself so much.

Silently, he begged Munechika to stop touching him. He whimpered and then moaned, “No, Mune—”

It was too late. He tumbled over the edge of orgasm, cursing himself. He wished he would just stop breathing. He had been shamed in front of Godou. He wanted to die.

He wanted Munechika to kill him...



After the sex, Shiiba was released, as promised. Munechika held him tightly, as he was still unsteady on his feet. Together, they left Godou's place, Kaname following behind.

They rode the elevator down to the lobby and left the building. Kaname went ahead to get the car.

"It's all right. I can walk now." Shiiba tried to sound firm.

Munechika put him down without a word.

Shiiba, using the walls to help support himself, walked outside into the fresh air. He saw that he was on the corner of a high-class residential area.

He tried to walk off alone, but Munechika stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "I'll take you home."

"I'm okay. I'll get a taxi," Shiiba said in a monotone.

"You can't, not looking like this," Munechika said, concern evident in his voice.

"I said I'm okay." Shiiba knocked Munechika's hand away. "I'm sorry. I just need to be alone now."

Shiiba meant he needed to be away from Munechika. He knew it wasn't Munechika's fault. He knew he should be thanking Munechika for saving his life. But he just couldn't make sense of everything he was feeling right now. He was embarrassed, angry, and upset.

Why did Munechika accept Godou's sick bargain? Had there really been no other way to leave? Why was Munechika that scared of Godou? It wasn't like the Munechika that Shiiba knew.

Shiiba wondered if Munechika had considered his feelings at all when the bargain was struck. Munechika might be fine with having sex in front of someone else, but what about Shiiba? Shiiba didn't want to be weak in front of Godou. But he had been stripped naked, made to spread his legs, and then penetrated like a woman. His pride had been ground into dust. The damage was irreparable now. Did Munechika know how much he'd hurt Shiiba?

Shiiba swallowed back the bitter, condemning words that wanted to come out. It wouldn't be wise for him to speak when his emotions were running so high. He would only end up blaming Munechika for everything, and that was unfair.

“Shiiba, I understand...”

“Masaki,” a voice called out. A man appeared from out of the darkness. “It's me.”

The man's trench coat was pulled up tight, and he was dressed warmly in a scarf and gloves.

“Shinozuka?” Shiiba was shocked to see his brother-in-law here. He couldn't really understand why.

“Come on. I'm here to pick you up.” Shinozuka offered Shiiba his hand.

For a moment, Shiiba wondered if he was hallucinating again, but he didn't care now. It was enough to see a familiar smile. Sucking in a shaking breath, he walked toward Shinozuka.

He didn't care why the other man was there, but now he had an excuse to leave Munechika.

“Shiiba.” Munechika tried to stop him, but Shiiba didn't look back.

He took his brother-in-law's hand. He felt that he would collapse at any moment, but Shinozuka offered him the strength he needed.

“You're all right now. You don't have to worry.” Shinozuka's voice gently eased Shiiba's tormented spirit.

“I guess you don't know me?” Shinozuka asked Munechika.

“No, I know who you are,” Munechika replied.

Shinozuka nodded and then turned to Shiiba, his eyes full of concern. “I heard from one of my staff who has Godou under surveillance that Shiiba was here. I came here to find him. I'll take him home tonight.”

“All right,” Munechika said, giving in. “I'll leave it to you. He was drugged, so

he might feel sick, but he should be back to normal in a few hours.”

A black Benz drove up from the parking garage. Kaname jumped out of the car. “Sir?”

Munechika told him not to worry and then turned back to Shinozuka. “I’ll leave him in your care, then.”

“Munechika,” Shinozuka said, stopping Munechika before he got into the Benz. “As a courtesy to a fellow police officer, I don’t intend to interfere in your relationship with Shiiba. But let me at least say this: you’re destroying him.”

Munechika said nothing in reply. He got into the car, and it sped off.



Shiiba leaned on Shinozuka until they reached a white sedan parked on the deserted street.

Shinozuka helped Shiiba get in the backseat and then ordered his driver to get going. The car probably belonged to Public Security, and the driver was probably a detective too.

“You’ll stay with me tonight. That’s alright, isn’t it?” Shinozuka asked gently, putting his arm around Shiiba.

Shiiba managed to nod. He knew he was safe now, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being hunted. He couldn’t let his guard down.

Shinozuka gently massaged Shiiba’s back. “Whatever happens, I’ll never abandon you. I’ll always be here. I promise.”

Shiiba recalled something that Shinozuka had said to him once, when Shiiba had been considering quitting the police force. Shinozuka had encouraged him to keep moving forward.

Gradually, Shiiba lost his strength. It was all right, though. He had Shinozuka with him. He didn’t have to be afraid of anything. No one could hurt him.

Feeling safe, Shiiba dozed off. While he slept, they arrived at Shinozuka’s home in Sendagi. Shinozuka carried him into the building and put him on the bed.

By the time Shiiba stirred awake, Shinozuka had already changed out of his clothes and into a bathrobe.

“Still sleepy?” Shinozuka asked.

“Yeah. Shinozuka, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“You told me before that I shouldn’t get too close to my S. Did you already know about Munechika and me?”

Under any other circumstances, Shiiba never would have asked this. But now he felt he could. This might be his only chance.

“Masaki, I haven’t been watching you, so I don’t know how things are. But I can guess. I’m not going to ask you if I’m correct, though. I don’t want you to tell me what he is to you. He doesn’t have any bearing on my relationship with you. I’m not your boss, and even though I worry about you, I can’t stop you. You can do what you like.”

Shiiba wanted to cry as he listened to Shinozuka. The man had always been honest with him.

“Can I ask you one more thing? Has Public Security been watching Godou?”

Shinozuka hesitated, but still answered. “Yes. He’s been funding radicals and extremist groups. There were concerns that he was going to use politicians to pressure the police to back off. Not the sort of man that we can leave to his own devices.”

Shiiba doubted if that was the only reason. Perhaps Shinozuka also suspected that Godou had killed Yukari.

“Shinozuka, do you think Godou could have...” He couldn’t finish. If Shinozuka didn’t know, then he shouldn’t be the one to break the news. Yukari’s death was a thing of the past for Shinozuka. To bring it all up again now would only cause Shinozuka a lot of pain. “Umm—sorry...it’s nothing.” He would keep that information to himself.

“You’re bleeding. If you’re hurt, show me.” Shinozuka reached out to peel back Shiiba’s shirt.

“No, I’m not. I...” Shiiba tried to get away, but his shirt fell open and revealed the piercing.

Shinozuka went pale. For a second, he looked enraged, but then, he composed himself again. “A butterfly? He really did mark you,” Shinozuka muttered as he inspected Shiiba’s chest. “I heard that he keeps a collection of butterflies that have only one wing.”

“I saw it on his wall.”

“He’s a sick man.” Shinozuka grimaced a little. “Masaki...” He had a far-off

look in his eye, as if he were meditating on something. He gently stroked Shiiba's hair. "He tore a wing from my beautiful butterfly. Such a beautiful butterfly."

Shiiba wasn't sure how to react to Shinozuka's strange, abstract statement. He wanted to know what Shinozuka meant, so he kept quiet. But Shinozuka didn't say anything more about it.

"You should rest. I'll be here all night."

Shinozuka smiled gently.

Could the butterfly that Godou destroyed mean Yukari? Shinozuka hadn't been clear.

Perhaps Shinozuka did know the truth and had been watching Godou. If so, the strength he must be exerting to suppress his personal feelings was impressive. He was extremely unlike Shiiba.

As soon as Shiiba closed his eyes, he started to drift off to sleep.

"Masaki."

Shiiba could hear Shinozuka's voice even in his dreams.

"It's so sad to see a butterfly try to fly with only one wing. I just want to keep it in my hand and look after it. I'm probably just being selfish, though. The only thing I can do is watch over it from afar."

Shiiba couldn't understand what Shinozuka meant, but the man's words left an impression on his dreams: A butterfly with only one wing fell to the ground...over and over...but it still kept fluttering in the wind...it flew with one wing, heading somewhere.

Out of all the trippy hallucinations Shiiba had seen that night, the image of the brave butterfly stayed.

Finally, Shiiba felt relaxed and he completely surrendered to sleep.

Chapter 8

The more time that passed, the harder it would be to see Munechika again. Shiiba understood that, so two days later, he gave the man a call. He didn't say why, but he asked to meet up. Munechika had Kaname drive him to the place Shiiba had suggested.

"Why did you call me here?" Munechika asked when he got out of the car.

The sea lay before them. Munechika squinted at it as if he were seeing a mirage. The afternoon sun was reflected on the cool winter water.

"I thought it would be nice to have a date here," Shiiba answered.

They were on the pier, which was littered with storage containers. Huge cranes lined up along the beach.

Munechika snorted. "You really have no idea what's sexy. You should have chosen a nice sandy beach. Not this place."

They stood side by side, looking at the sea. The silence dragged on. Shiiba wanted to say something, but, unsure of what Munechika was feeling, he found himself searching for the right words.

"Shiiba..." Munechika didn't take his eyes off the sea as he spoke.

"What is it?"

"It's high tide." Munechika's voice was quiet. Shiiba turned to look at him.

"What do you want to say?" Shiiba asked gently.

Finally, Munechika looked back at him. “I want you to delete me from the records as your S.”

Shiiba immediately shook his head. He had predicted this might happen, but it still hurt to hear those words. “I won’t. You’re my S. I’m not letting you go. You can’t tell me you’re scared. I didn’t think that you were a coward.”

Shiiba had meant to provoke Munechika with his words, but the older man let the implied insult wash over him.

“You may call me a coward if you want.” Munechika looked glum, and his half-smile held no mirth. “I’m sorry, but I’m finished now.”

“Munechika...”

Shiiba grabbed the man’s jacket collar. He couldn’t accept being abandoned by the man on whom he had relied so often. He felt betrayed. He couldn’t think straight.

“I can’t do any more for you. You must realize all this has its limits?”

“No it doesn’t! I’m not scared of anything, as long as I’m with you!”

Shiiba was hurting, but it was clear Munechika was hurting just as much. The older man was hesitating. He had found himself walking Shiiba’s path, with no clear exit in sight. They had both made vows to each other.

“I’m scared. I’m really scared. I’m scared that if you’re with me, I’ll hurt you. I couldn’t stand that,” Munechika said, gazing into Shiiba’s eyes. “If anything ever happened to you...I’ve spent too many sleepless nights worrying about it. It’s pathetic, but I am that scared.”

Shiiba was at a loss for words. Munechika had bared his soul. His S was scared that Godou would hurt him. His S was worried about putting him in danger.

“Shinozuka was right. If you stay with me for too long, then there’ll be no turning back. It’ll be the end of you.”

“Munechika...”

Was Munechika breaking up with Shiiba to protect him? Now, when he felt so very weak? Munechika's complete sincerity was the final nail in the coffin.

Shiiba had always been selfish. He had always used people. He had used his body to coerce Munechika to do S-work, despite knowing that Munechika wanted more from him than just sex.

Shiiba had known it well. He had used Munechika and pretended that Munechika hadn't cared for him. If he had been a good person, he would have put a stop to it a long time ago.

He had realized the truth a long time ago, but he had pretended not to see it. Instead of giving his heart, he had given his body. It was criminal. It was detestable. Pathetic. He didn't want to think about it. He was the worst kind of man. And despite all this, Munechika still cared for him. His S was still concerned for him.

"Munechika...I—I..." Shiiba stuttered. His chest was tight and it was hard to breathe. Tears streamed down his face. All he could see was Munechika.

Shiiba hated himself. He hated himself so much. He couldn't forgive himself. But he couldn't change the way he lived his life. He wished that he could disappear. He wished he could kill himself.

"I don't want to lose you. I...might not know what you want...but I...I need you." Shiiba knew Munechika could be impudent and arrogant sometimes. But still he didn't want to lose Munechika. He didn't want to let go. "I don't mind getting hurt. If it's for you, I wouldn't mind dying. Just don't tell me this is the end. I won't let it happen. You're mine...my S..." Shiiba trailed off. He knew he was simpering like a child. He had become so emotional, he could only think of his own needs. He was being selfish, but right now, he couldn't help it.

"Crying is against the rules." Munechika sighed and pulled Shiiba close to him. "You know that I hate seeing you cry."

"No, I don't. I just...I..." Shiiba faltered again.

I love you. More than anyone. More than anything.

He still couldn't say it, though. He couldn't express it. But in his torn and cracked heart, he loved only Munechika.

He was resigned to it now. He had vowed to not fall in love, but now he wanted to toss all his previous restrictions into the sea. He wanted to tell Munechika everything. He wanted to fall to his knees and beg Munechika to love him too.

But something inside Shiiba still held him back. The two conflicting emotions ripped his heart in two.

Munechika ruffled Shiiba's hair and then softly kissed his forehead. "Don't cry like a child," Munechika said, sounding exasperated. However, his eyes betrayed his true emotions. "I'm sorry. I just can't take another rejection."

Perhaps what had happened in front of Godou's apartment building, when Shiiba had chosen to go with Shinozuka, had hurt Munechika. In that case, Shiiba really was to blame for this mess. He was the one who had destroyed the relationship.

"I'm sorry," Shiiba mumbled. "I couldn't stop the way I was feeling that night."

"Don't apologize. I of all people know what I did to you that night. I wanted to do whatever I could to save you, though."

"I know. I know it was all for m-me," Shiiba stuttered again. He looked up.

Munechika was smiling down at him. "Look at you. Your eyes are so red."

Shiiba grimaced. "Whose fault is that?"

"Grimacing doesn't make you look any better," Munechika whispered in Shiiba's ear. He bent down and kissed him.

"Here? Now?"

"Here. Now."

There was no one on the pier. Only the sea stretched out in front of them. Shiiba made up his mind and wrapped his arms around Munechika. He buried

his face in the crook of Munechika's neck and took a breath, inhaling his lover's scent. "I'm cold."

"I'll warm you up."

Munechika pushed Shiiba against one of the containers and kissed him passionately.

Their lips met. Their tongues tangled. They expressed the depth of their desire in a way that words couldn't. They groped and fondled each other until Shiiba didn't know where he ended and Munechika began.

Munechika kissed Shiiba as he unzipped his jeans. The cold air hit Shiiba's sensitive skin and he shivered a little.

To protect him from the cold, Munechika opened his jacket and wrapped it round them both. "Is this okay?"

Munechika's warm breath hit Shiiba's cold ear.

"I'm fine. Please," Shiiba urged. He wanted them to be one again. He wanted to feel Munechika inside him. He urgently rubbed his groin against Munechika's.

Munechika sucked on his finger and then pushed it up inside Shiiba. Finally, Shiiba's desires were answered. He uttered a small cry.

Munechika turned Shiiba around, pressing him against the container and then pulling his jeans down further. He pushed inside Shiiba slowly. Shiiba wasn't wet or stretched, so it hurt, but Shiiba clung to Munechika and opened himself as much as possible. Munechika knew what Shiiba liked and thrust deep inside of him.

"Ah! Mmm..."

It hurt, but Shiiba felt everything. He wanted all of Munechika. He wanted them to be one.

"Munechika! Not yet..."

Munechika pushed in even deeper. "Yeah. I need more of you. Let me have

you. Shiiba...”

As Munechika thrust harder, Shiiba’s head thumped against the cold container. Munechika noticed and cradled Shiiba’s forehead in his hand. That was one of the reasons Shiiba loved him. He was so sweet. He noticed the small things.

Shiiba relaxed in Munechika’s arms. He kissed Munechika’s hands and sucked on his lover’s fingers.

“Mm...ah!”

“Shiiba, don’t forget,” Munechika said earnestly.

“Munechika?”

“You vowed never to betray me. I made you the same vow. You can ask for my help anytime. You’re never alone.”

Munechika seemed to sense that more danger lay ahead for both of them.

“Don’t leave me—whatever happens,” Munechika whispered.

Shiiba was lost in a dream and could only nod his head.

They got into the car together. Kaname didn’t say a word; he just started the car up. From where the car was parked, Kaname shouldn’t have been able to see their exchange. But Kaname was an astute man and probably had figured out what had happened.

Shiiba looked out the window, feeling a little guilty.

When Munechika took off his coat, his elbow brushed against Shiiba’s chest.

“Ow.”

Seeing Shiiba screw up his face in pain, Munechika looked worried. “You were injured?”

If it had just been a regular old bruise, then Shiiba would have ignored the pain. But the piercing that Motoaki had forced on him really hurt, and he

resented it. Shiiba said as much to Munechika.

“Why the hell haven’t you taken it out?!” Munechika shouted angrily.

“I want to, but your brother superglued it in. I’ll have to cut it off, but I don’t have the right-sized tools at my house. I’ll have to go and buy something smaller. But I just haven’t had time,” Shiiba explained.

“Come to my place,” Munechika ordered. “I have something small enough.”

When they arrived at Munechika’s apartment in Roppongi, Kaname brought them a small toolbox and a first-aid kit. Shiiba took off his sweater and sat down on the sofa. Munechika crossed his arms and scowled at his nipple.

“It’s red. Does it hurt?”

Kaname took out a tiny metal cutter. It was just small enough to get in the space between the end of the stud and Shiiba’s skin. Kaname skillfully cut off the end of the stud. He then pulled out the bar in one clean movement. He was swift about it, but the wound still hadn’t healed, so fresh blood now oozed from the opening.

“You need to disinfect it. It could get infected,” Kaname advised as he covered Shiiba’s nipple in gauze.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll put some coffee on,” Kaname said and stood up.

When Kaname had disappeared into the kitchen, Munechika turned to Shiiba. “I’m really sorry,” he apologized on behalf of his brother.

“It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is my fault. It’s my fault Motoaki turned out the way he has.”

Shiiba looked at Munechika. He understood what his lover was trying to say. He hesitated, wondering if he should ask about it. He didn’t know if he had the right. “Munechika. You don’t have to say anything.”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with you anymore,” Munechika stated firmly.

Shiiba nodded. “I know. Tell me?”

Munechika fiddled with the butterfly stud. “My mother was a hostess in an Akasaka club. She met the president of the Matsukura Group there. They became lovers, and a short time later, I was born. The president already had a wife. He divorced his first wife, but he still didn’t marry my mother. Instead, he took a liking to Motoaki’s mother. It was his second marriage. I hated him. He only ever hurt my mother. He never thought of anyone else but himself. When I was twelve, my mother died. I was taken into the president’s house, but I couldn’t stand living in that man’s territory. And so, even when I moved into the president’s house, I didn’t take the Matsukura name. My mother had an uncle that often looked after her. He used to lead a gang, and even when he quit the organization, he never totally cut ties with the criminal underworld. He often looked after me when I was little, and he continued to do so as I grew older.”

“Why didn’t you live with your uncle?”

Munechika grimaced. “He invited me to, but I refused. I hated the president, but I also hated his woman and the brother that I had never met. I felt so much rage for them, because they enjoyed a comfortable, happy life as his proper family. The life that my mother had been refused. I was childish. I believed that entering their home would be like some sort of revenge.”

Kaname returned, carrying a tray with cups of coffee on it. He placed it down on the table and turned to go, but Munechika stopped him from leaving. “Sit down. You’re part of all this too.”

Kaname nodded and sat.

“Motoaki’s mother was a young woman called Ayano. She was beautiful, and that was probably the reason the president forced her to be his lover. When she turned twenty, Motoaki was born. So, he married her. When they took me in, Motoaki was five and Ayano was twenty-five. Ayano was an obedient woman. She lived quietly with Motoaki and stayed away from people as much as possible. It surprised me. I thought that she would do whatever she wanted. But Ayano was kind to me, even though I was a bastard. I started to feel some

affection toward Ayano and Motoaki. I liked Ayano's sweet innocence. I wanted to care for her."

Munechika suddenly stopped himself. His eyes glazed over as feelings from the distant past resurfaced once more. Finally, he sighed and continued: "Ayano was the only woman I've ever wanted. Once I grew into a man, she fell in love with me too."

Munechika had told Shiiba once before that there had been a person he'd fallen so deeply in love with that it had almost destroyed him. That person, Shiiba now realized, had been Motoaki's mother.

"Of course, the relationship was completely forbidden. We would meet in secret, afraid that someone would spot us. The president discovered our relationship a year later. He went crazy and in a blind rage beat us both. It was clear that he wasn't going to let Ayano go. I decided that night that I would take Ayano away from the house."

"You..."

"Yes, we ran away together. We dropped everything and ran as far away from that man as we could. We rented a tiny, run-down apartment and lived together. We were so happy. But it only lasted two months." Munechika fell silent again.

"You were caught?" Shiiba asked.

"No. Ayano died. She slit her own wrists."

Shiiba was speechless. He gazed silently at Munechika.

"The president hushed it all up. Publicly, Ayano had died of a heart attack. No one else in the organization knows the truth. I cut my ties and from then on had no contact with the Matsukura Group. I sometimes kept in touch with Motoaki because I did care for him. When the president died four years ago, Motoaki asked me to come back to the Matsukura Group."

The truth behind these words was very grave. Munechika must have felt guilty for taking Motoaki's mother away from him. Motoaki must have been

deeply hurt that both his mother and half-brother had left him behind.

“I’m sorry that you got caught up in this. It should have stayed between me and my brother.” Munechika stood up. He looked tired as he walked into the bedroom.

Shiiba turned to look at Kaname. “Why did Ayano kill herself? They ran away together. Perhaps their relationship wasn’t conventional, but why did she die and leave Munechika behind?”

Kaname shook his head. “No one knows why. I suspect even my boss doesn’t really know. Maybe it was an impulsive act. Maybe she was scared for the future. Maybe she felt guilty about leaving Motoaki. No one can know once a person is dead.” Kaname cleared his throat. “That day, I got a phone call from the boss. I went to their apartment as fast as I could. As soon as I came through the door, I saw boss cradling her lifeless body in the bathroom. She was already dead before he’d come home.”

“I think I should be with Munechika.” Shiiba stood up.

Kaname stood as well and said, “Please, don’t let me get in the way.”

Shiiba was about to open the bedroom door when Kaname called out to him: “Mister Shiiba? My boss is a very deep man. He has too much love in him. Sometimes all that passion can overwhelm other people...such strong love can be poison to the weak.”

Kaname truly understood Munechika.

He understood his boss more than anyone else. He wanted Shiiba to understand his boss, as well. “I’m sorry. I’ve said too much.” He gave a small smile.

It was the first time Shiiba had witnessed Kaname acting so...human.

Shiiba watched Kaname leave. Suddenly, he remembered something from a year and a half ago. He had been nervous about pursuing his relationship with Munechika. Kaname had been standing in front of that very door, and he had admonished Munechika about his aggressive approach toward Shiiba—but

Kaname had called his boss “Mister Keigo.”

Perhaps, in that moment, Kaname had been warning Munechika to not overwhelm Shiiba. Perhaps Kaname had been warning him to not make the same mistake twice.

Shiiba opened the door and stepped into the bedroom. Munechika was lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“Where’s Kaname?”

“He’s gone.”

Shiiba kneeled on the floor and rested his upper body on the bed. He pressed his forehead against Munechika’s.

Munechika stroked Shiiba’s hair. “It’s all in the past,” he muttered. “But Motoaki isn’t the same as he was in the past. He used to be such a bright, happy child, but when Ayano died, he changed. He started acting weird. First, his mother ran away with his half-brother and then she committed suicide. She ran away from his only home. He couldn’t run away and was left all alone.”

Munechika sighed. “I feel that I’ll always be trying to make up for my crimes against him. Perhaps I have been avoiding it. I don’t know how I should behave around him. It’s all because of my hesitation to reprimand him that you’ve been dragged into all this.”

“Munechika, it’s not all your fault. You know it doesn’t matter how you treat him, the only person who can change Motoaki is Motoaki himself.”

Shiiba knew that that had been the case where he was concerned. He had only stopped hating Shinozuka for getting over Yukari’s death because he himself had changed. Shinozuka had always treated him kindly, but, for a long time, Shiiba had been too stubborn to accept his friendship.

Munechika sat up and patted the space on the bed next to him. “Come here.”

Shiiba moved up and snuggled closer. Munechika held Shiiba’s head against his chest. Shiiba could hear Munechika’s heart beating. It made him feel sad.

Munechika had put his life on the line, but still lost his first love forever. Shiiba wondered if Munechika hated her for leaving him alone. Shiiba knew that Munechika's feelings had to be jumbled: the pain of loss and regret, mixed with guilt. And now, he was with Shiiba.

The silence, full of things they didn't say, was frustrating. If they were ordinary lovers, then they would have tended each other's wounds with words of love.

Shiiba had never really let himself dwell on their relationship. He rarely thought about it.

“Munechika...”

“Yes?”

The words wouldn't come, though, so Shiiba just held Munechika even tighter.



Chapter 9

Shiiba didn't go home that night. He stayed with Munechika until dawn. He just couldn't leave Munechika's side.

They didn't exchange words. They didn't share their bodies. Instead, they slept silently, wrapped up in each other's arms beneath the sheets. They were at peace, cut off from the rest of the world.

Early the next morning, Shiiba left Munechika still asleep. He went home briefly to change his clothes and eat some breakfast, then he headed out again to the Yoshizawa Iron Works.

When he got there, he found the door open, so he peeked in. Inside, he saw a young man who must have been about twenty years old. The young man noticed Shiiba, shut down the machine he was working at, and approached.

“Can I help you?”

“Is Mister Yoshizawa here?”

“The boss is in his house at the back. He's not feeling well, so he's probably resting.”

Shiiba thanked the friendly boy and headed around the factory to the attached living area. Just as he was going to ring the doorbell, he could hear Yoshizawa screaming: “Leave it! You can't just do whatever you want!”

Shiiba tried to sneak a peek at what was happening inside. Before he got a chance, though, the door swung open and Kiri ran out. She bumped into him with some force.

“Oh!” Kiri exclaimed with shock when she looked up to see Shiiba.

“Are you all right?” Shiiba asked.

Kiri didn’t react. Instead, she just turned away and ran toward the factory.

“Kiri! Wait!” Yoshizawa shouted after her.

“Hello.” Shiiba nodded a little.

“Ah, Mister Shibano. What are you doing here?” Yoshizawa was clearly surprised to see Shiiba again.

“I’m really sorry to disturb you. I thought that I should come by and check on how you were doing. You’re busy, so I’ll come back another day.”

“Oh, no. It’s nothing important.”

Yoshizawa invited Shiiba in for some tea. Shiiba accepted the offer and stepped inside the house.

“I know that it’s none of my business, but I know of a really good hospital. It hires a lot of specialists who can treat patients like Kiri. So, I brought a brochure with me...” Shiiba offered a pamphlet to Yoshizawa, who accepted it with a grave expression on his face.

“You really didn’t have to. But thank you for thinking of us.”

Shiiba had investigated the hospital so that he could have an excuse to visit Yoshizawa again. Although to say that that was Shiiba’s only motivation would be untrue. Shiiba was also genuinely concerned about Kiri and thought that she could be treated.

“You were arguing with Kiri?”

“Nothing important.” Yoshizawa smiled, but he wasn’t convincing. He flicked through the brochure that Shiiba had given him. “I’ve not been very well recently, and she’s had to manage a lot of work for me. But she went and accepted some new work without asking me. We can’t manage big orders here, so I told her not to. I know she likes a challenge, but this one is too difficult. This is work, and she needs to take it more seriously.”

Yoshizawa continued to speak with Shiiba about his worries regarding his health and his business. Shiiba listened carefully, thinking that he might glean some information from what the old man had to say, but he didn't discover anything new.

Yoshizawa was old and frail. He was just an ordinary old man. After this second meeting, Shiiba was really starting to doubt that the old man had anything to do with the bootlegged guns. In that case, Yoshizawa's relationship with Maruoka had nothing to do with Shiiba's case.

Maruoka had been selling bootlegged guns to Yakuza. The members of the Gambino gun shop in Shinjuku had been approached as potential buyers for these guns. Yoshizawa had the skill to make such high-quality weapons. Could all these things really just be coincidences?

No. They had to be related. Shiiba knew he'd missed something.

He left Yoshizawa's home. As he walked back around the building, he met Kiri again, who was standing next to a drinking fountain by the side of the factory. She had rolled up her sleeves. Shiiba wondered if she might be cold. He approached her, intending to speak directly with her about the hospital he'd found.

"Miss Kiri?" he called out to her.

She swung around. She must have been washing her face, because drops of water dripped from her nose and chin, and her hair was stuck to her cheeks.

"I just spoke to your grandfather about this hospital..."

Suddenly, Shiiba stopped. He stared at Kiri's arms.

Kiri realized what Shiiba was looking at and quickly unrolled her sleeves. She then tried to run inside the factory, but Shiiba grabbed her by the wrist.

"What are those?" Shiiba asked.

Kiri's eyes betrayed nothing.

"On your right arm?" Shiiba asked again.

Kiri's lips moved, but no sound came out.

A butterfly.

Shiiba was sure she had mouthed the word butterfly. He was taken aback.

Kiri saw her chance to escape into the factory, and she took it.

Shiiba had the feeling he'd seen something he shouldn't have. Kiri had a colorful tattoo of a butterfly on her right. That wasn't unusual. Butterflies were a popular tattoo design.

But the one that Kiri had wasn't an ordinary butterfly. It had only one wing.

The next day, Shiiba was still trying to understand what he had seen. The tattoo seemed to indicate that there was connection between Kiri and Godou, which presented the worst possible scenario: the guns that Maruoka had been selling hadn't been made by Yoshizawa, but Kiri. Kiri had the skills, Yoshizawa had told Shiiba that much. If Yoshizawa had passed on his experience and knowledge to her, then she could easily make works of such superior craftsmanship.

Shiiba learned at Maruoka's funeral that Maruoka and Yoshizawa were acquaintances. Kiri may have met Godou through Maruoka. Shiiba didn't know what their exact relationship was though. But he knew that Godou was a gun fanatic and he may have found a use for Kiri.

However, she was so young. Did she even know that she was breaking the law? Yoshizawa must have told her the laws on bootleg gun production. He himself had served jail sentences for the crime. He wouldn't want his precious granddaughter to follow such a dark path, would he?

The more Shiiba thought about it, the more questions he had. The whole situation was a nightmare.

And today was the day he had to give his regular report.

Shiiba could only speculate on Kiri's involvement, so he decided it was unnecessary to include those findings in his report. He finished preparing the

details that were most relevant and was about to leave his apartment when his phone rang.

It was his superior, Takasaki, who sounded flustered. “Shiiba? Have you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“I guess you haven’t,” Takasaki muttered, partly to himself. “Sit down. Keigo Munechika has been shot.”

It took a few seconds for Shiiba to process this information. But as soon as he did, he felt faint. He closed his eyes and reached out to the wall for support.

“Hey. You there? Are you okay?” Takasaki asked urgently.

“I’m fine. How is Munechika?” Shiiba asked, preparing himself for the worst.

“It’s not life-threatening.”

Shiiba sighed in relief.

“He was coming out of his office in West Shinjuku when it happened. The perpetrator ran off. We haven’t caught him yet. It looks like it could be linked to some kind of gang rivalry. COC4 is investigating now. Stay away from Munechika for the moment. I’ll meet you in Shinjuku.”

Shiiba confirmed his superior’s orders and then hung up the phone. He immediately tried calling Munechika, but the line didn’t connect. He was in the hospital, so he probably had his phone off.

Shiiba resigned himself to the notion that he couldn’t do anything right now. He was about to leave the house when the phone rang again. He saw that the incoming call was from a public telephone.

“Hello?”

“It’s Kaname. I hope everything is all right with you?”

“Kaname? How is Munechika? I heard that he was shot.” Shiiba had residual panic in his voice.

Kaname quickly eased Shiiba's fears. "Please don't worry. He was hit in the side, and the bullet missed his vital organs."

"How is he feeling?"

"Fine. He's conscious."

Now that Shiiba knew Kaname was with his S, he felt he could relax a little. "What about the man who did it?"

"We haven't had any trouble with the other Yakuza groups, so we don't have a clue as to the shooter's agenda."

"Could it be Godou?"

"We don't know anything yet. But I believe that there is a good chance he was involved. Mr. Shiiba, the police and other Yakuza will be visiting Mr. Munechika. I know that you are concerned, but I think it would be best if you stayed away for a while. If anything happens, I'll call you." Kaname hung up.

Shiiba hit the wall in frustration.

Munechika had been shot, yet he couldn't go and see him. He knew it couldn't be helped, but he couldn't stand it. He was upset. Frustrated. Hurt.

Shiiba took several deep breaths to calm himself.

Shiiba finished his report in less than an hour. Normally, he would be ridiculed by the older detectives, but, today, they looked at him with compassion. All of the detectives in the room had an S. They all worried about their own S agents, so they could all sympathize with Shiiba's plight.

On the way home, Shiiba met with several of his informants, but he didn't pick up anything useful that night. Exhausted, he decided to head home early.

He got off the train at Kamikitazawa. As he walked to his apartment, his cell phone rang. The display indicated that it was Asakawa.

He probably wanted to ask about Munechika. Shiiba pushed the green button

to take the call.

“Masaki?” Asakawa said, panicked. “Where have you been? You haven’t been picking up your phone.”

“I was on the train, so I had it on silent ...”

“Where the hell are you?!” Asakawa was sounding increasingly frustrated now.

“I’m heading home.”

“Wait right there! You can’t go home!” Asakawa screamed so loudly Shiiba had to move the phone away from his ear. What the hell could have happened?

“You mustn’t go home. I just had a call from Shino. He’s too busy right now, so he got me to call you.”

“Shinozuka? What’s going on?”

“Listen, your place is being watched by the police.”

“Again?” Shiiba sighed.

But what Asakawa said next shocked Shiiba so much he couldn’t even sigh. “They’re taking you in.”

“What?” Shiiba thought he must have misheard.

“They’re going to take you in. If you go home, the officers are waiting there to force you to resign. Then, they’ll take you to the head office. If you go with them, it’s the end of you.”

They were going to take him in for questioning? Shiiba couldn’t believe any of what he was hearing.

“Wait. They stopped following me. They didn’t find anything suspicious. I don’t understand why they would still be interested in me.”

“It was a decision by Human Affairs. Someone must have told them something. It was probably a politician that made something as big as this happen.”

“I see,” Shiiba muttered.

Shinozuka had warned him. He had said that Godou used politicians to put pressure on the police. He’d been right.

Godou had told Motoaki that he wasn’t to touch Shiiba until he had Godou’s express permission. That was because he was being watched. When the surveillance on Shiiba stopped, Motoaki could do what he wanted.

Shiiba was finally starting to realize how powerful Godou actually was. He was manipulating the police—from the inside.

“I don’t really know what’s going on...” Asakawa continued. “Shino has given orders for you not to be apprehended yet. He’s going to talk to the First Division head and the politician because he doesn’t think there is enough evidence against you. He’s doing his best to clear your name.”

Shinozuka had found Shiiba to warn him he was being watched. Now he was working to help Shiiba out of this mess. Shiiba hadn’t thought that Shinozuka would ever consider him a priority, but he’d been wrong.

Shiiba clutched the cell phone. “Thank you for letting me know.” He hung up and squinted at his house, which was only just in front of him. Parked outside was a car he didn’t recognize.

He turned around and briskly headed in the opposite direction. He flagged down a taxi and asked to go to Shinjuku.

Shinozuka had gotten Asakawa to pass on the information because it was that urgent. If Godou was involved, it wouldn’t matter that they didn’t have enough evidence to take him in. Godou would use whatever he had and pull whatever strings he could to get his way. It probably wouldn’t even be that hard.

Godou had promised Munechika that he would leave Shiiba alone. Munechika had trusted him. That was why he’d had sex with Shiiba in front of Godou. If Godou had kept his promise, this wouldn’t be happening. Godou had tricked Munechika. He had never intended to honor his promise.

Shiiba seethed with rage. This was a declaration of war. It may as well have been Godou that shot Munechika.

Shiiba closed his eyes. As the taxi raced on, he leaned back and thought.

What was he going to do? He could be fired from the police force. Or worse still, he could be slapped with false charges and lose his freedom. Shinozuka was trying to clear his name, but that wasn't going to be easy.

What did Shiiba want most?

What did he have to do?

If this was his last day, what did he want to do? What did he want to do?

He didn't have to think about it for very long. He already knew the answer.

Godou and the police might have been watching, so Shiiba slipped into the hospital through a staff entrance.

Munechika was on the top floor since Kaname had asked for a private room. Shiiba approached the white bed. Munechika had an IV drip in his arm. He was also sleeping soundly.

Shiiba sat on the chair next to the bed and watched Munechika. He wanted to watch Munechika sleep for hours. But he couldn't. There was no time. He swept Munechika's hair back and stood up. He was turning to leave when Munechika called out to him.

"Shiiba?" Munechika's voice was weak.

Shiiba swung round.

"How long have you been here?" Munechika also sounded drowsy. He had probably been given something to help him sleep.

"Just a few minutes. You were sleeping so soundly, I didn't want to disturb you. I was going to go home."

Munechika chuckled a little.

“You’re so cold-hearted.”

He seemed fine, but he was still pale. Shiiba had heard that he had lost a lot of blood.

“I’m going now. I have a lot of work to do.”

“I see.”

Shiiba pulled the sheets up over Munechika and tucked him in.

“Are you in pain?” Shiiba asked.

“Not really. The drugs are doing the trick.”

“Get better soon.” Shiiba smiled gently.

“Of course I will. This time next week, I’ll be back in bed with you.”

Shiiba’s lips quivered a little. “I’m looking forward to it,” he said, knowing he couldn’t possibly keep his word. He bent over and kissed Munechika.

This might be their last kiss. It hurt Shiiba just thinking about it. But he couldn’t let Munechika know.

“Bye.” Shiiba stood up and headed out the door.

Munechika called him back. “Shiiba.”

Shiiba turned once more.

Munechika had a serious expression on his face. “Don’t forget what I said.”

“About what?”

“What I told you. On the pier...”

Shiiba remembered: *“You can ask for my help anytime. You’re never alone.”*

There was no way Munechika could know what he was planning, but sometimes Shiiba sensed that Munechika could see right through him.

He nodded, but there was nothing he could do. He knew that Munechika would consider what he was about to do as a betrayal. He knew his lover would

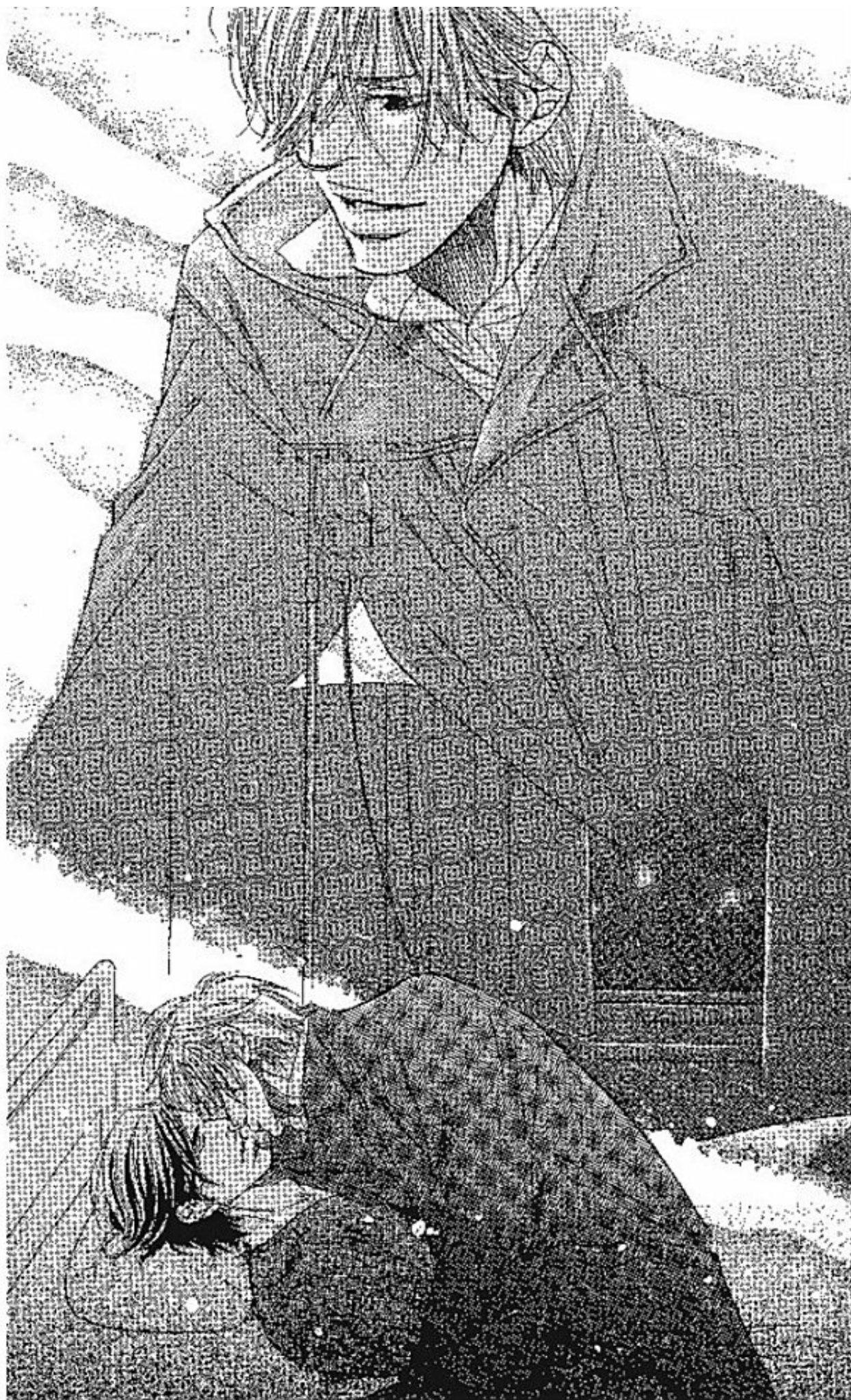
be angry.

But still, Shiiba had to go. He had to leave. He had to be alone.

Yet he knew that no matter where he was, he would be thinking only of Munechika.

He came back to the bed and hugged Munechika. He kissed the older man more passionately this time. His tongue slipped inside Munechika's mouth.

Only a short amount of time passed, but for Shiiba it felt like an eternity.



Munechika reached out to pull Shiiba close, but Shiiba quickly moved away.

“Shiiba...?”

“I’m not alone. I’ll always be thinking of you. It’s going to be all right. I’ll be all right.” Shiiba said that to convince himself as well as Munechika.

Munechika looked concerned and sat up. “What are you planning? What are you going to do?”

Shiiba could see that Munechika was in pain. He reached behind him and grasped the doorknob.

“Shiiba, wait.” Munechika was grimacing in pain, but he still tried to get out of bed.

Shiiba shook his head. “Stay there. I have to do something. Don’t look at me like that. We’ll see each other soon. I’ll come back to you.”

“Don’t go.” Munechika reached out for him.

Shiiba smiled. “Wait for me, Munechika.” He opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. Then, he broke into a run.

“SHIIBA!”

He heard Munechika calling for him. He wanted to turn around, but he couldn’t. He had to keep going. Hearing Munechika’s voice in his head, he stepped out into the night air.

Afterword

It's been a little time since my last work, but finally here is the third book in the S series, "Split". I have to thank my loyal readers for all their support. It's all because of you that the series has stretched to a third volume.

When I chose my title I wanted to include the themes of ripping and cracking. Because so many parts of Shiiba's heart are torn and cracked. I wonder what is going to come pouring out of those cracks? That was the theme I was going for.

The most important scene in this book is the scene on the pier. The tears that Shiiba cries are really sad. My impression of Munechika also really improved. I think that there are parts of Munechika that we haven't seen yet. Next time we'll see more of the true Munechika... I'm kind of nervous now! (laughs) I get the feeling that the more I write about Shinozuka, the more complicated he becomes as a character. I think he has a much darker personality than Shiiba gives him credit for.

And then my personal favorite, Kaname, finally we get to see him fight. Actually, before I started writing I considered that under Godou's orders, he would do something to Shiiba. But my editor got me to think again. I guess that having a character like Kaname completely change like that would damage the believability of the story.

The two new faces, Kuro and Godou, make a dangerous combo and I think it worked pretty well. I hope to get them in my next work too.

Once again it's all been set off by some fantastic interpretations by Chiharu Naru. All the illustrations are fantastic. S would not be complete without Chiharu's hard work. I really believe that. So, Chiharu, thank you so much. I'm looking forward to the next illustrations.

I also want to thank my editor for carefully checking every part. I'm always so grateful for my editor's hard work. All of your advice has been so helpful to me and will extend beyond this work. I'll be counting on you for the next volume too.

When this book was released, the second installment of the drama CD was released too. I hope you all listen to it. It also includes a booklet with a short story written by me.

I've now got a mailing list to keep you updated. It works on your mobile phone too so if you're interested, please sign up! You can find it at: <http://blog.aidaz.net> The next volume will complete S. I'm working really hard on it so I hope you'll all get it. I couldn't have reached a third volume without all your support so please don't abandon me now!

The final volume is due out in November. I hope to see you all there. Thank you everyone!

February, 2006

Saki Aida

S

Vol. 4

Afterglow

Available Now!

"I don't want to lose you. I...might not know what you want...but I...I need you." Shiiba knew Munechika could be impudent and arrogant sometimes. But still, he didn't want to lose Munechika. He didn't want to let go. "I don't mind getting hurt. If it's for you, I wouldn't mind dying. Just don't tell me this is the end."

Undercover detective Masaki Shiiba has one mission in life—to eradicate guns in Japan. It's an overwhelmingly tough job, but Shiiba's willing to give up his body, his soul, even his life to achieve his goal. He's also willing to use anyone to get what he wants.

For almost a year now, Shiiba has been using Keigo Munechika as his "S," his spy, to get information on the gun dealings of the Yakuza world. Shiiba uses his body in exchange for Munechika's sensitive information...and only his body as far as Shiiba is concerned. Shiiba vows their relationship will not go beyond that.

A new case and some new information further complicate this difficult relationship. When a rowdy young man with a penchant for piercing and an enigmatic Yakuza leader cross paths with the young detective, sins of the past are unearthed once more. Sins—sins that just might shatter the fragile bond between the detective and his "S."



